

# **Performatives, Performativities and Education**

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## Abstract

This thesis considers the various ways in which J.L. Austin's discussion of the performative utterance—of what is done with words and, indeed, of what words “do”—has been taken by philosophers. It shows how different understandings of the performative dimension of language can illuminate thinking about language and education. Austin notes that some (performative) utterances “do things” (such as “I christen this ship the...”). Certain kinds of utterance “perform” an action. What is particularly interesting about Austin's discovery is his conclusion that truth statements (what he calls “constative utterances”) are, in different ways, also doing things. Despite the fact that the “ordinary language philosophy” with which Austin is particularly associated is normally understood as a development within analytic philosophy, his impact goes well beyond this, and his ideas have sometimes found themselves in some strange places. This brings us to the first appearance of “performativity”, the term “”coined by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. First appearing in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, the term purports to describe the state of knowledge within postmodern society. For Lyotard, Enlightenment narratives have been replaced by an obsessive concern with “effectiveness”. Here Austin's performative is used as a metaphor. The second treatment of the word “performativity” considered originates with Judith Butler. Butler argues that “truths” pertaining to gender are not “rooted” in anything other than linguistic performances. When reiterated, such truths come to be perceived as constitutive. The ideas pertaining to performatives mentioned above will be interspersed with other work on the performative utterance drawn from philosophy and social theory. Here I draw on the work of Habermas, Derrida and Cavell amongst others. The philosophical analysis provides the backdrop for a discussion of language, ethics and education.

## **Signed Declaration**

**The work presented in this thesis is my own work**

**Word Count: 79508**

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following; my supervisor Paul Standish for all his fabulous help and support over the last five years (which went well beyond the call of duty!); Carine Seimandi for her love and support during the vast majority of the time I spent working on the thesis; Pamela Munday for being the sort of parent who has always been caring and devoted, despite having to put up with the darker moods that working on PhDs can give rise to; my brother Tim and Granma (she doesn't like the (d)) for all their love and support; Jennie Francis for her support and friendship during the final stages of writing up; colleagues—Mary Hilton, Jo-Anne Dillabough, Peter Huckstep and David Whitley—who gave me a place to stay when I was commuting to Cambridge and/or put me up during the final stages of the writing process; colleagues at the University of Cambridge including Morag Styles, Ian Frowe, Christine Doddington, Natalie Heath, Dominic Wyse, Pam Burnard, Liz Taylor, Mike Younger, Sylvia Woolfe and many others; fellow students at the Institute of Education such as Naomi Hodgson, Mandy Fulford and Anna Strhan amongst others; friends at various universities in Belgium and at the University of Kyoto, whose probing questions during conferences and colloquia had a considerable impact on the writing of this thesis; former colleagues at Dinnington Comprehensive School; my students at the University of Cambridge.

Slightly different versions of some parts of this thesis have been published including “Passionate Utterance and Moral Education” in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 4(1) and “Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness” in *Clinical Pedagogy Record*, 10. “Derrida, Teaching and the Context of Failure” has been published in *The Oxford Review of Education*, 37(3). “Performativity, Statistics and Bloody Words” appears as a chapter in *Educational Research: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Statistics*. “Improvisation in the Disorders of Desire: Performativity, Passion and Moral Education” has been accepted with changes by *Ethics and Education*, 5(3).

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: What's it all about?

Let us begin with some blunt remarks. This thesis examines the various ways in which J.L. Austin's discussion of the performative utterance is taken up by a number of philosophers (and in some cases sociologists) to develop interesting ways of thinking about what is done with words and, indeed, what words "do". In the process I hope to show how various understandings of the performative dimension of language can illuminate ways of thinking about language and education.

John Langshaw Austin was born in Lancaster and educated at Balliol College, Oxford. He became White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford. Austin was a staunch advocate for examining the way words are *used* in order to elucidate meaning. He is generally regarded as a British-American analytic philosopher. The school of twentieth century analytic philosophy (which to some extent is also Austrian-German) has two main sub-branches. The first is the logical positivist branch of philosophy that includes the work of Frege, Russell, Mach and indeed, early Wittgenstein. The most famous philosophical works deriving from this movement include Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein, 1922) and A.J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1946). Logical positivist ideas were developed in the work of Rudolf Carnap and Carl Hempel (amongst others) in what became known as the Vienna Circle.

As legend has it, the second branch of analytic philosophy emerged out of weekly discussions held sometime between 1936 and 37 in Oxford. Austin is credited with initiating these discussions and is thought to be their leading spirit up until the war. What emerged from these discussions is generally known as “ordinary language philosophy.” It was taken up especially after the end of World War II, centering most fully in Oxford and is sometimes called “Oxford philosophy”. Austin tends to be treated as the leading exponent of that form of analytic philosophy, though some argue that the movement begins with G.E. Moore. The former’s work appealed to those philosophers (including Searle, Strawson and Grice) who were attracted to analytic philosophy but shared a distaste for logical empiricism. Austin’s most famous writings include *Sense and Sensibilia* (1964), ‘A Plea for Excuses’ (1961), ‘How to Talk: Some simple Ways’ (1953) and *How to do Things with Words* (1962).

As regards the performative utterance, the main tenet of Austin’s discovery is fairly straightforward: there are kinds of utterance that do not simply state or describe things, but “do things” in being said. So, when a priest utters the words “I now declare you man and wife” he has not just said something to the bride and groom, he has “married them”. We can therefore say that certain kinds of utterance “perform” an action in being said. This all seems fairly straightforward and in the case of explicit performatives it is. However, Austin comes to the conclusion that truth statements (what he calls constative utterances) are, in different ways, also doing things.

The “impact” (consider what has happened to this word—what it now “does”) of Austin’s performative (and theory of speech acts) on the world of philosophy is particularly unusual given the philosopher’s background. What I mean by this last remark is that Austin’s performative shows up at the kind of party that would not normally be frequented by his peers from the tradition he is usually placed in. One does not tend to find much reference to Moore, Russell, Ayer, Strawson, Grice, Searle, etc. in poststructuralist philosophy, gender studies, queer theory, sociology or debates on the historical/cultural status of knowledge within the university. Indeed, it is amusing to imagine Austin looking down from the kind of metaphysical dimension he had no time for at the kinds of work he had inspired. I do not use the word “inspired” lightly—there is nothing sneering, hostile or wholly critical about Austin’s reception in these various domains.

That is not to say that the responses to Austin (which will feature throughout this thesis) are wholly sympathetic or uncritical. By the same token, the performative utterance can be adopted rather hastily and used in ways that may seem a little forced. This brings us to the first appearance of the word “performativity”. The term “performativity” was coined by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. It first appears in *The Postmodern Condition* (first published in French in 1979 though not translated into English until 1984). Performativity denotes the systematic functioning of knowledge within postmodern society (Austin would certainly be appalled by a sentence such as this one!). Lyotard describes a situation in which the narratives of the Enlightenment have been replaced by a concern for “efficiency” or “effectiveness”—for what works. Here the performative acts as much as a metaphor as anything else. Truth (the constative) becomes coterminous with whether or not it is efficient. This has little to do with what Austin meant when he noted the constative and performative dimensions of the utterance. Indeed, Lyotard’s philosophy of language is rather Austinian in certain respects. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

The second treatment (chronologically, and in terms of the structure of this thesis) of the word “performativity” that we will be considering here originates with philosopher, feminist critic and queer theorist, Judith Butler. One “commonsense” view of gender differences dictates that such differences are innate or biologically determined and relate to an inner truth belonging to the world. Butler argues that such “truths” are not “rooted” in anything other than linguistic performances, which, through their reiteration, come to be perceived as constitutive.

Having outlined the meanings ascribed to performatives and performativities, I should mention that, during the thesis, these ideas will be interspersed with other work on the performative utterance drawn from philosophy and social theory. Lyotard’s “performativity” is a more or less direct response to Habermas’s treatment of consensus, which, in no small part, relies on a reading of Austin. Butler’s performativity is both an affirmation of Derrida’s reading of *How to do Things with Words*, which appears in his famous essay “Signature, Event Context” (Derrida, 1988), and a response to Bourdieu’s account of language’s “performative magic”. Stanley Cavell’s discussion of performance and passion both exposes the limitations of



Austin's work on the performative and directs its insights further into the expressive complexities of language.

### **A bit of autobiography**

It is difficult, without being incredibly glib, to give a brief introductory explanation of what all the "difficult philosophy" described above might have to do with education or, more narrowly, schooling. Therefore, I want to let this emerge more slowly. It is customary when writing a thesis to give an autobiographical account of how one came to undertake such a project in the first place. This necessarily involves some story-telling (with, I daresay, a few unintentionally tall tales thrown in for good measure). Let us begin with a recent story, one that will hopefully serve to open things up.

In the last few years I have taught in a university education department. During a meeting concerning a Masters course in which students "research their own practice", one of the discussion topics concerned the extent to which the students should give autobiographical explanations for why they were taking on a particular project. It was felt by most participants that this should be a statutory component of a Masters thesis. Consequently the whole discussion had the scent of artificiality, box ticking, possibly an element of the confession. Then again, perhaps this was partly to do with the nature of the course. The notion of researching practice sometimes conjured images of Piglet retracing his footsteps round a tree in search of a woozle. This feeling was only intensified when I discovered that some of my colleagues intended to research their own practice on a course where others were researching theirs (Pooh joins Piglet). The circle could be drawn ever wider without anybody necessarily letting out a giggle.

Now this is not to say that some of the students on this "teacher research" course had no stake in what they were doing, though quite a few had to strive quite hard to come up with a topic to look into. Neither would it be fair to say that their projects were necessarily lacking either richness or insight. However, it was notable how excited some of them were during the week in which the lecture focused on philosophy of education. During this session, the students were asked to consider the relative merits of liberal and progressive approaches to education and what had happened to these

ideas in the current climate of “performativity”. To what extent did the focus on minimum target grades, SATS, learning styles, learning to learn, self-esteem etc. jar with liberal or progressive ideals? Had education “evolved”? When I say that the students were excited this is to some degree relative. They were less excited by (though not uninterested in) sessions on coding, data analysis and the difference between qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research.

As part of the research into the practice of those teaching others to research their own practice, the person who wrote the lecture materials was later interviewed and asked why this session had gone so well. There was an expectation that he would talk about the quality of the materials, the accessibility of the readings, the engaging language in which the lecture was couched, in other words the formal effectiveness, perhaps appropriateness of the session and the quality of the content. The answer that was given touches on none of these themes (though this is not to say that the lecture was entirely lacking in these respects). Rather the reply was that “this is the stuff they ‘care’ about”.

I would not want to suggest that the students did not care about their projects or “mixed methods” etc. One can care about solving a problem in the classroom. That said, the very notion of “solving a problem” implies a scientific detachment and a series of methods to sort it out. Scientists of all sorts may care about the problems they seek to solve but this is a very limited kind of caring. Failure to find a solution to a problem may result in frustration but somehow does not capture the generality that pertains to caring about one’s profession. It is this kind of caring that informs my thesis. I shall indicate what this amounts to with a short biographical account of my experience of school teaching.

Following a break from education I studied for a PGCE in Secondary English at a university in the North of England. I still recall being somewhat shocked by some of the pronouncements issued in sessions given to the entire cohort. Most shocking of all was the “discovery” that modern pedagogy was no longer about teaching your subject. At that moment I did not have a philosophical objection to this kind of statement. Rather I recall a shudder deriving from a mild terror. What could I teach if not my subject? The lecture’s following diatribe concerning “key” and “transferable” skills did nothing to soften the blow. I remember that it was not at all clear that the speaker knew

what these things were and, worse still, I didn't like the sound of them. Moreover, even then (and this would be something that would follow me into school meetings) I found it hard to listen to this stuff—it became a blur. I found my mind wandering—I was “off task”.

Throughout my PGCE and during my five years as an English teacher I remember some feelings of incredulity at the sorts of things teachers were expected to swallow or put into practice. It is tempting to make a list of these because that is how they were generally presented to me—via bullet points, on a PowerPoint presentation. Presenters would be “experts”. As I do not want my thesis to be about “supplying information” or setting myself up as an “expert”, let us continue with sentences and paragraphs for the moment. Anyway, what I discovered about teaching during this time was that it tended to put a lot of emphasis on planning (schemes of work, seating plans, strategies for monitoring pupils, planning how to best go about planning). If I was not planning, I was assessing—if the child breathes, assess the quality of her breath. Is this hyperbolic? Well, only a little.

During my years as a teacher, I was often struck by the kind of language used. There was a “strategy” for pretty much everything and a lot of “terms” cropped up that seemed to be drawn from psychology. Stimulate the reptilian brain. Accommodate kinaesthetic learners. There would also be plenty of slogans. Are the children “learning to learn”? How can we get them to “maximise their potential”? “Our school is about “inclusion”. We are an “including school”. In short, the language of teaching is rich (is this really the right word?) in acronyms, slogans and technical terminology. It takes a while to adjust to this language. At first it induces fear and insecurity—and the feeling that everybody seems to understand what is going on except me. With “experience” the language becomes second nature and provides the linguistic competence and horizon for professional life. It binds you to the fellow members of the professional community. Induction into the profession works only too well.

Though the linguistic universe described above makes schooling sound like a terribly cold business, this is not exactly the case. The culture of schooling was, as I saw it, “warm” in a “limited” sense. Warmth was evident in the kind of libidinal drive that was diffused through the language, with us all on a journey, a journey of

“improvement”, and with the managerial smile, a shit-eating grin, perfected on the battlefield of “difficult meetings” (whether such “grinning” is genuinely warm is perhaps open to question). Anyway, let me give the flavour of one such meeting as it was described to me by a colleague. Albert had been called in to a meeting with a senior manager, Sharon, due to “behaviour management” issues in his classroom (he was not managing). Albert, who at that time was very new to the profession, expected a telling off, along with perhaps a few pointers about how to improve. What he got was the sort of smile described above, some comforting words about how difficult the job was, and a long list of courses he might attend on behavioural techniques.

Albert had already attended such courses, which usually involved pictures of icebergs (you never know what is going on below the surface of a child’s behaviour!), and did not feel that they would benefit him. At some point he asked Sharon to stop and to tell him what she really thought about his ability to teach. He recalled that she had no response to this but simply continued to smile and persisted with what had gone before. Perhaps being asked to say what she thought in the way that was being asked for here—call this, if you will, the responsibility for her words—was simply inaccessible to Sharon. Maybe it was buried beneath the “skills set” she had acquired on courses for dealing with “failing teachers”. I do not want to pour scorn on Sharon here. She was, after all, just “doing her job”. She was being “professional”. But I am reminded of the well-known Monty Python sketch in which the Spanish Inquisition reveal their weapons of torture—the “soft cushions” and the “comfy chair”. But they were only joking. Albert is no longer in the teaching profession.

## **Against sneering**

The above description may sound like sneering. This is not my intention. I have to hold my hand up and admit the extent to which I was waist-deep in the linguistic mulch of schooling. I wanted to get “positive value” on my statistics. The idea that my lessons might only be judged “satisfactory” filled me with fear. Yet there was always a nagging suspicion that something was rotten about it all. That said, it is easy to let such feelings retreat into the background. There are so many things to record, observe or assess. So much busyness, so little time for thought. Moreover, if you want to be

promoted, you had better attend “managing from the middle” courses with enthusiastic facilitators who want to upgrade you with new skills that can go on the CV. Do an MEd where you research your own practice and add that as well. If you have any “commonsense”, you play by the rules and learn to speak the language fluently. After a while you will be in jargon stepp’d so far that should you wade no more, returning were as tedious as go’er.

But those who cross the river do tend to care a great deal about children and education. Then again, as the scene between Sharon and Albert demonstrates, “caring” in professional culture is perhaps not what we ordinarily take it to be. The real danger is that ultimately, Sharon’s way of caring might be the future of care. Does this sound nostalgic? It is not meant to be. When I was at school, there was a good chance that your teacher would be drunk in the afternoon, certain teachers had not fully adapted to laws regarding corporal punishment and weaker students were often left to their own devices. If schooling has been “professionalised”, this is not a wholly bad thing.

What I have outlined in this set of musings provided a “calling” (of sorts) to write this PhD. Indeed, the difficulty of responding to the kind of “calling” that I think teaching ought to represent, and that I have felt it to represent, is also at work here. I am trying not to be too negative or to succumb to the temptation to sneer. To sneer is to partake in nihilistic laughter, laughing but certainly not interfering with—in fact, remaining complacently disengaged from—the object of disdain. To sneer is to be the worst kind of aesthete (in the Kierkegaardian sense). It is not my intention to take a lofty stance on what is presented from the world of schooling. This is not to say that satire is out of the question.

## **Difficult philosophy**

Having given an account of my experiences of schooling, it might also be appropriate to give some indication of my background in philosophy. I studied for a degree in Philosophy and English during the mid nineties. The philosophy department was something of a Mecca for Wittgensteinians due to the influence of figures such as D.Z. Phillips. As a consequence of a more than passing commitment to Wittgenstein, a great

deal of emphasis was placed on the philosophy of language—an entire year was devoted to a module on the history of linguistic philosophy. There was little in the way of Continental philosophy on offer, though one could take an optional module on existentialism. Consequently, my introduction to “Continental” ideas came through the study of literary theory in the English Department. To sum up, my undergraduate and postgraduate experience (I did a Masters degree in the diversity of contemporary literature at Swansea) provided a rich and varied experience from both sides of the Continental/analytic divide (a rather artificial distinction, surely). This education provided what you might call a backdrop for much of the work carried out in this thesis. It is hard to imagine how the chapters presented here could have been written without it.

That said, the reader might wonder quite why the philosophy alluded to so far in this introduction is necessary. Indeed, when I have delivered conference papers drawn from this thesis (which introduced the ideas of Derrida, Butler, Cavell and Deleuze) I have sometimes been asked to justify all this difficult philosophy. The implication seemed to be that the “philosophy” in question was simply a pretentious adjunct to the meat of the discussion. The subsequent paragraphs give a flavour of my attempts to respond to such questions (or, should I say, accusations?).

By now it should be quite apparent that there is a certain dissonance between the various registers that are handled during this thesis, between the language of complex philosophy and the language of schooling with its strange mixture of technical terminology and “ordinary” language. The reader will experience a jarring of discursive registers that will probably seem strange and perhaps “inappropriate”. Though I am tempted simply to let this happen, I want, for the sake of scholarly seriousness, to thematise this “inappropriateness” and see it as a critical dimension of the thesis—critical, that is, as critique.

The dissonance in question points to the ways in which language can open up, house or foreclose different ways of seeing the world. The philosophy introduced here is home to various ways of seeing that educational discourse is necessarily blind to (I make this point despite the fact that terms like “deconstruction” and “performativity” are regularly employed and hollowed out in schools and education departments). This is

not to say that the philosophy introduced here is meant simply to negate educational discourse or show up its narrow mechanistic character. Rather I want the dissonance described above to be “affirmative”. Indeed, the kinds of philosophy championed here are not on the whole (or at least not wholly) adversarial. On the whole they are affirmative and productive. They speak of a way of doing philosophy that traverses the kind of dialectic where there are winners and losers. Moreover, they reveal possibilities for language that gesture beyond or sidestep around nihilism however close to it they may be prepared to tread. The philosophy in question tends to embrace the messiness of language and the hurly-burly of the form of life. Those philosophers of education who question the need for difficult philosophy tend to follow in the wake of an approach to language that demands precision and conceptual clarity. Though these can be worthy aims, they speak of decided limitations. More than this, much educational discourse flourishes on cleaning up the mess. It is hard to be an “effective” walker, they say, when wallowing in mud or tramping through sand, and sometimes they seem rather to aspire to raise their enquiries to the circuits of a frictionless medium of thought. To challenge that discourse’s narrowness and shallowness, we should perhaps resort to messing up the clean—at least, to making it better earthed.

Though undoubtedly this thesis draws on “difficult Continental philosophy”, as an educationalist I do my best to make such philosophy accessible to as wide an audience as possible. There are a number of figures whose work, I believe, has similar ambitions. Here I am thinking of philosophers of education such as Paul Standish, Richard Smith, Gordon Bearn, Nigel Tubbs, Lovisa Bergdahl, Jan Masschelein, Stefan Ramaekers and Naomi Hodgson, to name but a few. In many respects their work has provided me with an education in “difficult philosophy” that has complemented my undergraduate experience. That said, I also want to note that championing the relative accessibility of this work within the philosophy of education does not imply the chastisement of the likes of Derrida and Cavell for their difficulty (such chastisement is a favourite pastime of some members of the philosophy of education community). I feel that the linguistic complexity and experimentation that marks the work of Derrida, Lyotard, Butler, Cavell and Deleuze leads to a philosophy that is rich in ambiguity and possibility. These philosophers open up new and exciting ways of seeing the world. Their experiments in and on language are fundamental to reframing the possibilities of philosophical writing.

With this in mind, it is worth noting, that the same cannot necessarily be said of their followers, or in some cases, disciples. Secondary literature on poststructuralism can sometimes read like a celebration of obscurantism and “cleverness”. “Schools” of deconstructionists, queer theorists, gender “specialists” emerge modishly to champion the kind of philosophy that is, in fact, anything but modish. Moreover, one only has to look at what has happened to “deconstruction” in the hands of “Derridians” to get a flavour of the problem. Derrida does not treat “deconstruct” as an illocutionary verb to be used in the present indicative active tense (at least, not in any straightforward sense). There is also failure within a considerable body of poststructuralist secondary literature to “engage” with the work of Derrida *et al.* Literary theorists regularly refer to “linguistic slippages”, but tend to be very shy about explaining what these are. This is perhaps due to a shared sense that everybody within that academic community knows what a linguistic slippage is. However, this can seem “lazy”. Such laziness is not, I think, characteristic of the philosophers of education mentioned above who, in providing examples drawn from education, engage in ways that are not modish. This thesis tries to follow in their footsteps.

I shall now provide a breakdown of what appears in the subsequent chapters. This will be suitably (or perhaps, “appropriately”) vague. I do not want to ruin the story.

## **Chapter 1**

Chapter 1 provides a fairly detailed account of Austin’s understanding of performatives. Austin shows how the philosophy of language had traditionally concerned itself with truth statements or “constative” utterances and had therefore ignored other types of utterance in which issues of truth are not fundamental. He calls such utterances “performatives”. Explicit performatives include utterances such as “I now declare you man and wife” in which something is done through speaking (in this case marrying). Though Austin originally makes a distinction between constatives that state things and performatives that do things, he comes to discover that this distinction is not absolute. Austin resorts to semantics and grammar to try and clear this up (though there is always a sense that he knows it cannot be cleared up) and eventually leaves it alone. In the last part of the book he discusses different aspects of the



utterance —the locutionary aspect (the forms of the words themselves, the illocutionary aspect (what is done with words) and the perlocutionary aspect (what is done by utterances).

In the second part of this chapter I consider Austin's legacy within the analytic tradition. This involves a discussion of themes such as assertion, fit, convention and logic. Here I argue that those ordinary language philosophers following Austin miss or ignore important aspects of his work. Austin is not a "theorist" nor is he fundamentally concerned with the "truth" of utterances. Moreover, Austin's writing is extremely funny and the "tone" of his prose is not an adjunct that just happens to make his work an entertaining read. Ultimately, the neglect of these dimensions means that the likes of Searle and Vanderveken have nothing particularly interesting to say to the arguments surrounding education that feature in this thesis.

## Chapter 2

The second chapter marks an abrupt departure from the realm of analytic philosophy that characterised chapter 1. Here I present a discussion of Lyotard's performativity, a concept that has come to denote the systemic relations within the social order of postmodernity. In what looks like an almost negligible endnote to *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard draws an analogy between performativity and J.L. Austin's concept of the performative. For Lyotard the postmodern condition is characterised by a drive towards effectiveness that either bypasses or colonises Enlightenment concerns with truth and justice. Lyotard employs Austin's merger of constative and performative concerns as a metaphor for the postmodern concern with truth as effectiveness. Lyotard's allusion to Austin, however serves another purpose. *The Postmodern Condition* is in part an attack on the consensual political philosophy of Habermas. For Habermas, Austin's account of felicity conditions that apply to the performative utterance provides a language that helps to reconstruct the differentiated realms of rationality in order to forge a kind of post-linguistic turn to Kantianism. Habermas argues that the Enlightenment project can be set back on the right path if concerns with truth are merged with those of normative rightness and appropriateness. But Lyotard finds Habermas's project terribly naïve. Performativity depends on consensus and the purity of Habermas's conditions cannot be met. Instead what is required is an agonistic

approach to linguistic pragmatics, whereby one continually reinvents the rules of the game. However, Lyotard finally gives up on agonistics—the performative genre of discourse will always win out in the end. All that is left for Lyotard is an ascetic pilgrimage to nothingness. That said, his account of the sublime offers a gleam of light.

In the last part of this chapter I bring these ideas to a discussion of schooling. Clearly, the Enlightenment philosophies of education, the liberalism espoused by philosophers such as Peters and Hirst or the progressive tradition (passed down from Rousseau through to Dewey and the British policy makers of the 1960s) can only inspire “incredulity” (to use a word borrowed from Lyotard). In this section of the chapter I draw on scenes from schooling to demonstrate how performativity has taken hold of education. Through approaching these scenes I try to indicate the relationship between the philosophies discussed in prior sections and the “ordinary”, “everyday” experiences of schooling.

### **Chapter 3**

In chapter 2 we saw that Lyotard, who coined the term “performativity”, believed that the only resistance to “effectiveness” was to turn to absence and silence. His vision seems hopelessly pessimistic. Derrida, on the other hand, offers a more optimistic metaphysics. I begin this chapter by giving an account of some of the general features of Derrida’s philosophy of language. This aims to be helpful on two counts. Firstly, it helps to set up and situate the main philosophical text that guides the discussion—‘Signature Event Context’. Also, there are certain loose parallels that can be drawn between Austin and Derrida’s philosophical approaches. This chapter contains a reading of J.L. Austin’s theory of the performative utterance. Derrida finds much to admire in Austin’s philosophising. However, he argues that Austin’s treatment of context misses something important about how things are done with words. Derrida maintains that, having shown how truth claims are bound up with performative concerns, Austin takes a step backwards by fixating on external contextual factors that must be in place for the performative utterance to be happy—for it to “succeed” in doing what the speaker intends it to do. This ignores the iterability of language and the ways in which words are ultimately bound neither by the intentions of the speaker, nor by any other aspect of the environment in which the utterance takes place.

The current thinking in regards to successful teaching and learning invites a comparison with Austin's treatment of context: for a lesson to be successful, a set of contextual factors must be put in place. One of the aims of this chapter is to bring critical attention to the ways in which notions of "success" and "failure" are applied to teaching and learning in English and Welsh schools.<sup>1</sup> I argue that treating teaching and learning in these terms sees language as something to be tamed by context. Once we recognise that words cannot always or necessarily be brought under control then this will open the door to creative ways of thinking about teaching and language.

Blockages to the kinds of creative approaches described above reflect Lyotard's performativity. In the last part of the chapter I discuss how statistics and the particular kind of discourse that emerges around them serve to suture the wounds in the body of discourse that is effectiveness culture. The earlier arguments pertaining to difference and iterability frame the discussion of statistics that follows. I begin with a discussion of numbers as particular kinds of words. Though numbers are, in a sense "iterable" they are not iterable in a way that is comparable to other words. Indeed, in certain instances when numbers become iterable, when meaning is artificially or excessively conferred upon them, they seem to exemplify the false metaphysics of presence that Derrida's philosophy undermines: they become idealised forms of Saussure's linguistic sign that have no equivalents in ordinary language. I develop this train of thought in relation to statistics. Statistics appear as surface signifiers of underlying truth. However, there is another dimension to statistics whereby they also present the promise (or threat) of absolute scepticism. This paradox serves to suture over linguistic slippages—as it were, churching the language in denial of its natural fertility. It "legitimizes" the farcical "fixing" of statistics that goes on in British schools. That said, statistics offer a limited form of power. Statistics like all numbers can never operate alone. In British and American education, the drive to boost statistics finds its voice in policy initiatives that become slogans (No Child Left Behind, Every Child Matters). However tightly slogans that become mantras may stitch up the instabilities that inhere

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<sup>1</sup> You do not have to grow up in Wales, although it may help, in order to remember that the jurisdiction in question covers England and Wales, but not other parts of the UK.

in language and stem its creativity, this can never be wholly successful. It is within the ordinary and extraordinary operations of language that hope lies.

## Chapter 4

This paper considers the role that Judith Butler's conception of the term "performativity" might play in the provision of a multicultural education in pluralist Western societies. The first section of the paper will outline what Butler means by performativity. Her thinking on this matter derives from Derrida's reading of Kafka's "Before The Law". This involves recognition of the connection between foundationalist approaches to knowledge and legality: "the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits". Butler argues that the anticipation of the law (knowledge) as "an authoritative disclosure of meaning" conjures its object. She reads this approach in relation to gender which is treated as an interior essence to be disclosed, a treatment which produces that essence. Butler also recognises that this should not be thought of as a singular act but considered as a form of linguistic repetition and ritual. She sees the "invocation" of performativity as very much an ethical matter. For Butler, language performs us; various discourses designate who and what we are. This understanding of performativity has an ethical dimension because it works against essentialistic or biologicistic performative discourses. It clearly applies to issues of race and ethnicity as well as gender.

This chapter also features another thinker who discusses the magical power of a language, namely the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Like Butler, Bourdieu argues that language exerts a force that naturalises power relations. Bourdieu is very interested in Austin's philosophy of the performative but believes that the latter, having recognised issues of power in language misses an opportunity to discuss the sociological significance of this. What particularly interests Bourdieu about Austin is his set of felicity conditions. It would seem that only particular speakers are authorised to issue certain utterances. The magical force of language is partly bound up with the concealment of such authorisation and its implications. If you like, language conceals the extralinguistic factors that authorise or silence speech.

Butler and Bourdieu have much in common. However, Butler believes that Bourdieu puts too much emphasis on extralinguistic factors in his account of power (this is somewhat ironic—for Butler, following Derrida, this is also the problem with Austin’s philosophy of language). Butler, drawing on Derrida, refers to the iterability of language in which words, though they carry their old meanings and resonance with them, find themselves in new contexts in which they may do damage or act creatively; consider the reappropriation of the word “queer” within the gay community. Understanding language in terms of fixity can act as an obstacle to justice.

The final section of the paper considers how schooling might, in some fairly general sense, respond to Butler’s approach to performativity. What this requires is more than a simple recognition of difference, but an understanding of how difference is linguistically performed. This segues into a discussion of the performative discourse that postcolonial theorist Edward Said (Said does not use the term “performativity”) describes as Orientalism. Said shows how the Western distinction between Orient and Occident constructs differences from afar—there is no attempt to understand other cultures, but rather a tendency to read them in terms of characteristics considered undesirable by the colonial power. For example, Enlightenment humanism constructs a notion of the inhuman unenlightened culture. In the final part of this section, we will consider how documents such as the National Curriculum for English, though motivated by liberal aspirations, reinforce this performative discourse in the infantilising distinctions between a national literary heritage and writing from other cultures.

## **Chapter 5**

Derrida and Butler focus on the locutions (words themselves) and their performative force. In Chapter 5 I draw on Stanley Cavell’s notion of “passionate utterance”. Passionate utterance acts as an extension of/departure from J.L.Austin’s theory of the performative—we may read it as both. Austin’s discovery of the performative (“a type of utterance which is neither true nor false”) leads him on a journey toward what Cavell describes as a crisis. This crisis occurs when Austin is unable to disentangle the constative (the kind of statement that is either true or false) and the performative utterance (which acts a model of speech as action).

The “catastrophe” in Austin’s theory springs from the ternary distinction, in which the performative utterance is viewed in terms of its locutionary aspect, illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect; this distinction follows on from the failure clearly to distinguish the constative from the performative utterance. Cavell notes that Austin, by reiterating Stevenson’s claim that “Any statement about any matter of fact which any speaker considers likely to alter attitudes may be adduced as a reason for or against an ethical judgment”, lapses back into a philosophical realm, from which he had worked so hard to depart. Cavell’s discussion of perlocutions (which include passionate utterances) is an attempt to save Austin’s theory from catastrophe. In the process Cavell touches on the possibilities for a moral education which is not moralistic.

In the final section of the paper, I bring Cavell’s approach to moral education to bear on Michael Hand’s argument in his paper “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?”. Applying Dearden’s “epistemic” criterion, Hand discovers that there are no rational arguments for treating homosexuality as a controversial issue. Following Cavell’s approach to “passionate utterance”, I try to show that treating utterances pertaining to homosexuality in terms of passion/expression avoids the “moralism” that can accompany a narrow, epistemic approach. I also suggest that there is a parallel between the narrow limits of a particular kind of narrowly conceived analytic philosophy and the limits on expression imposed by the apparatus of performativity.

## Chapter 6

The last chapter aims to build on the notion of an expressive approach to language put forward by Cavell. I suggest that Cavell either introduces or uncovers a Nietzschean dimension to language as performance. Gilles Deleuze is perhaps a more unabashed follower of Nietzsche. I look at three images of thought that appear in the introductory chapter of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. Deleuze and Guattari begin by discussing tree-like thought, which they describe as both the dominant form of Western thought and the oldest and weariest kind of thinking. Tree-like thought projects an insular depiction of the world in which knowledge emanates from a root to which it can

always return—it follows the logic of the One that becomes two. I suggest that the apparatus of Lyotard's performativity is also tree-like.

Deleuze and Guattari's second image of thought is the fascicular root. Here the principle root is aborted leading to a multiplicity, which flows from it. Modernist authors like T.S. Eliot who portray the world as multiple and fragmented might seem to exemplify fascicular thinking. With fascicular thought, the unity, which is aborted in the object, is returned to in the subject who, in a sense, gains control of multiplicities, by occupying a higher spiritual realm. In this section, I provide a reading of a Classics lesson portrayed in *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, which provides something of a cautionary tale against fascicular modes of thought. I also focus on Ronald Barnett's contribution to a debate with Paul Standish, which features in *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education*.

In the third section of the chapter, I consider Deleuze and Guattari's third image of thought—the rhizome. Plants of the rhizome type grow by a process of cloning or lateral spreading; they do not have the central trunk of the tree, with roots and branches extending outwards from this. Rhizomes are in a sense always on the outside, moving between the roots of trees. Rhizomatic thinking is therefore also always on the outside and is characterised by the line as opposed to the point, by intensity rather than structure. At the end of this section, I look at two Classics lessons. In some senses, both lessons deal with the same issue. However, the first lesson is structured in accordance with the performative norms of contemporary pedagogy. In contrast, the second example corresponds to a rhizomatic pedagogy, in which intensity and lines of flight predominate. It is not my aim to dismiss tree-like structures, but rather, to demonstrate the importance of rhizomes.

The final section of the chapter takes seriously the notion that although a “rhizomatic” education might seem an attractive way of reframing approaches to education, it can easily run up against accusations of elitism. One might argue that it is all very well to imagine an education that involves an intense experience unencumbered by a structuring apparatus, when the students are already reasonably well balanced, able to control their behaviour and sufficiently intelligent to deal with the disorientating aspects of learning that does not proceed in accordance with measured stages. Indeed it

might be argued that for less able/disaffected students, carefully structured/fast paced lessons provide the only means for ensuring that learning takes place. In this section I shall consider (1) whether the contemporary (nihilistic?) preoccupation with “excellence” and the various identities imposed on different kinds of students is not itself bound up with the suppression of intensity, and (2) the persuasiveness of certain scenes from schooling that depict an intense education (for students who do not find learning easy) that is neither characterised by speed nor controlled by objectives.



# Chapter 1

## Austin and Speech Act Theory

### Introduction

The aim of this short chapter is to provide as descriptive account as possible of Austin's theory of the performative. I am aware of the obvious problems that accompany such a venture! But it is necessary to include such a chapter, as Austin's philosophy provides a focal point for the arguments put forward by all the major protagonists who appear in this thesis. The importance of Austin's philosophy to the work of Lyotard, Butler, Cavell and Derrida varies greatly: Austin is a major figure in Cavell and Butler's philosophical projects, whereas his influence on Derrida and Lyotard's writing, while resonating powerfully in their thinking, is not as explicitly significant. To put this another way, the major works of Butler and Cavell will invariably refer to Austin and the performative utterance, whereas Austin makes fewer appearances in Derrida's writing and only, it seems, merits a single footnote in Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*. However, I will attempt to demonstrate the link between Austin's performative and Lyotard's famous and much cited understanding of performativity.

The reasons for the inclusion of a short chapter on the performative derive, in part, from a desire to avoid extensive repetition. If the main strands of Austin's thinking

around the performative are outlined at the beginning, then a necessary background to the more complex sections of my discussion will already have been provided. By the same token, if any confusion should accompany the appearance of Austinian terminology, then the reader need only refer back to this section of the thesis.

Unlike the chapters that make up the bulk of the thesis, this chapter will not conclude with an Austinian reading of (or approach to) current educational issues. This is not because Austin has nothing to say to the philosophy of education or to educational practice. The discovery/invention of the “performative” as it appears in Austin’s famous series of lectures anthologised as *How to Do Things With Words* represents a tentative step into a philosophical realm, the topography of which is very cautiously handled. It marks a dramatic opening up of possibilities within the philosophy of language, an opening which Austin occasionally revels in but, more often than not, recoils from, especially at moments when the potential to capitalise on the sheer ingeniousness of his approach present themselves. The main protagonists in this thesis seize on the opportunities afforded by the theory of the performative and their various approaches have more direct import for the philosophy of education.

The last part of the chapter will include an account of philosophy in the analytic tradition that takes Austin as something of a starting point. I will try to show that, in that reception of his work, important features of Austin’s approach (including his “style”) tend to be ignored, to the detriment of work within Speech Act theory.

## Constatives and Performatives

In the opening sections of *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin makes a distinction between what he calls the “constative” utterance and the “performative” utterance. This distinction is arrived at when Austin recognises a problem with “traditional” approaches to statements. In the philosophy of language, prior to Austin, utterances were grouped within the category of the statement. Statements are said to describe things or state facts. Austin immediately sets out to problematise such an approach: “It was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’, which it must do

either truly or falsely.” (Austin, 1976, p. 1) Austin notes that a certain suspicion had developed within the philosophical community, that many so-called “statements” failed to present themselves in terms of verifiability as regards truth or falsity. One way of dealing with such “pseudo—statements” was to regard them as various forms of nonsense. Austin is, with characteristic humour, not prepared to let the matter rest with a distinction between verifiable statements and nonsense (“Yet we, that is, even philosophers, set some limit to the amount of nonsense that we are prepared to admit we talk”), thus signalling at an early stage, that certain utterances may not conform to verifiable “statements” but may be worthy of serious consideration. Before looking at the kinds of utterance which are interesting (not nonsense) but do not meet the philosophical requirements of a statement, Austin wishes to bring some clarity to the definition of the kind of utterance which does concern itself with truth. He calls this kind of utterance/statement the ‘constative’.

### *The ‘Constative’*

Austin arrives at the term ‘constative’ to avoid the messiness that accompanies the unquestioning use of the term ‘statement’ to cover both descriptive utterances and truth claims. He notes: “Not all true or false statements are descriptions, and for this reason I prefer to use the word ‘Constative’.” (p. 3)

### *The ‘Performative’*

Austin’s build-up to the performative utterance combines the sense of an important breakthrough with a certain reticence regarding that importance. With regard to the problematisation of the “statement” as an all-encompassing entity that merits philosophical study, Austin writes:

Whatever we may think of any particular one of these views and suggestions, and however much we may deplore the initial confusion into which philosophical doctrine and method have been plunged, it cannot be doubted that they are producing a revolution in philosophy. If anyone wishes to call it the greatest and most salutary in its history, this is not, if you come to think of it, a large claim. It is not surprising that the

beginnings have been piecemeal, with *parti pris*, and for extraneous aims; this is common with revolutions. (pp. 3-4)

Austin, elusively, decides not to elaborate on what he means by a “revolution” but perhaps takes this to be obvious. If the “statement” as a coherent unit of knowledge to be analysed and studied begins to fall apart, then so does the philosophical edifice on which it has been constructed. The way in which we use language begins to demonstrate its vital importance to a philosophical programme that had taken so much for granted. By the same token, if language begins to loom so large, and there are sensible examples of it that are impervious to truth claims, then the parameters that formerly surrounded philosophical discourse have been widened. It is now necessary to consider what Austin means by a performative utterance, and to look at how the “performative” widens those boundaries.

Austin identifies utterances that conform to the grammatical norms that apply to constative utterances but are not constative utterances. He is also clear to point out that these utterances do not relate to philosophical distinctions between facts and values; that his examples present “none of those danger signals which philosophers have by now detected or think they have detected (curious words like ‘good’ or ‘all’, suspect auxiliaries like ‘ought’ or ‘can’, and dubious constructions like the hypothetical)”. He is clear to point out that:

“Utterances can be found, satisfying these conditions, yet such that

- A. they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and
- B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of, the doing of an action, which again would not *normally* be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something. (ibid.)

The “disappointing” (Austin’s word) examples of such utterance include saying “‘I do (sc. Take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)’—as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony” and “‘I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*’ as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stern”. (p. 5) What is notable about these examples is

that they do not describe anything or state anything which could be verified as true or false. Rather, the utterances are examples of linguistic usage in which something is “done” during the speaking of the words. Austin neatly demonstrates the strength of his point using the example of wedding vows: “When I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it.” Austin chooses to call such utterances performatives:

What are we to call a sentence or an utterance of this type? I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for short, ‘a performative’...The name is derived, of course from ‘perform’, the usual verb with the noun ‘action’: it indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something. (p. 6)

Austin notes that performatives do not only make their appearance in institutional settings. Many “performatives are contractual (‘I bet’) or declaratory (‘I declare war’) utterances” (p. 7), and instances of performative utterances would also include bequeathing and (perhaps most importantly for Austin) promising.

Austin anticipates some of the possible objections to this idea that speaking is *doing*. He recognises that in certain cases some physical action may accompany or act as a substitute for an utterance. For instance: “I may bet with a totaliser machine by putting coins in a slot”. (p. 8) By the same token, if the priest who performs the wedding ceremony is not sufficiently qualified, the ceremony will not be successful. Austin does not seek to deny that extra-linguistic features need to be in place for a performative to function successfully, but he still insists that: “The uttering of the words is, indeed, usually a, or even *the*, leading incident in the performance of the act”. Nevertheless, the necessity for certain contextual factors to be present is extremely important for the act to be successful or “happy”, as Austin puts it.

## *Felicity Conditions*

Thinking of performatives in terms of success and happiness leads to another important distinction (at least in the early stages of the lectures it is a distinction) between the constative and performative utterance. Whereas the constative utterance is determined by its truthfulness, the performative utterance is determined by its conditions of happiness. Austin calls such conditions “felicity conditions” and gives examples of the necessary conditions which make an utterance felicitous:

- (A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional, procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,
- (A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
- (B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and
- (B.2) completely.
- (Γ.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further
- (Γ.2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently. (pp. 14-15)

Here, Austin is confronting a number of different problems. With (A1) he recognises the institutional aspects of language use and notes the correct procedures which must be followed. As with the earlier example of the priest, the people who utter performatives must have the authority to do so and must perform the utterance correctly and completely. Austin clearly recognises that there is a difference between the first four and the last two criteria. This is marked by the need for a certain sincerity of intention on the part of the speakers, in the sense that they believe in and mean what they are saying. This gives the impression of depth to Austin’s project. However, this

apparent depth, which accompanies the happiness and success of the performative, is about as deep as Austin is prepared to go. It is important to recognise that a certain depth of feeling is only necessary for the happiness or success of the performative. It does not prevent us from saying that a performative utterance has taken place. This is made abundantly clear when Austin writes about promising.

When discussing promising, Austin pours scorn on philosophical positions that would maintain that if there is no intention to keep a promise, then a promise has not been made. He finds a classic example of this in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, when Hippolytus says: 'my tongue swore to, but my heart (or mind or other backstage artiste) did not' (p. 10). Here is Austin:

It is gratifying to observe in this very example how excess of profundity, or rather solemnity, at once paves the way for immorality. For one who says 'promising is not merely a matter of uttering words! It is an inward and spiritual act!' is apt to appear as a solid moralist standing out against a generation of superficial theorists: we see him as he sees himself, surveying the invisible depths of ethical space, with all the distinction of a specialist in the *sui generis*. Yet he provides Hippolytus with a let-out, the bigamist with an excuse for his 'I do' and the welsher with a defence for 'I bet'. Accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*. (ibid.)

Austin clearly demonstrates a deep suspicion toward philosophy that champions "the invisible depths of ethical space". One might say that Austin anticipates Derrida's critique of logocentrism, which, the latter believes, has plagued Western philosophy since its inception. Austin is obviously suspicious of the invocation of a realm of thought that, in its representation of philosophical purity, can be separated from our usage of language. His point is that this unworldliness comes to provide an excuse for the things we do with language. He is also aware that by favouring philosophical flatness, he becomes open to the charge of superficial theorising. However, Austin has no desire to casually dismiss the notion of "intentionality" from the debate. However, it is given a secondary importance by becoming a felicity condition for the performance of a promise. This is most clearly expressed when Austin tackles the notion of a "false"

promise. Austin is clearly unhappy with this notion, invoking, as it does, a depth hermeneutic which he is trying to steer away from. He points out that when we speak of a false promise we are not saying that the person has not made a promise, or that they have made a mistake. The promise has been made, the performative utterance is not “void” but has been given in “bad faith”. It is also interesting to note that the notion of a false promise tries to draw sensible utterances that are not related to truth claims back into the realm of verifiability. Avoiding such reclamation is an important feature of Austin’s project.

The example of promising highlights the aforementioned distinction between the infelicities which Austin marks using the English alphabet and the conditions he marks using Greek letters. Austin describes utterances that fail due to being botched (the correct words are not uttered, or the participants lack the necessary status) as “MISFIRES” (p. 16), where the botching makes the utterance void. In the case of a marriage ceremony in which the incorrect words are used, a marriage will not have successfully taken place and can therefore be declared void. However, Austin describes cases in which we make promises when we have no intention of keeping those promises, as “ABUSES”: —they lack sincerity but do not nullify the promise; they make it unhappy.

Austin goes into considerable detail when describing the different kinds of infelicity, and, for the purposes of this thesis, it is not necessary to follow him through all the twists and turns, although it should be noted that different acts can become party to differing forms/combinations of infelicity.

### *Constatives and Infelicity*

Following his account of the different kinds of infelicity Austin makes a hesitant entrance into an area of direct interest to this thesis: he makes a dramatic about-turn in his thinking on the distinction between the constative and the performative. Here is Austin:



Lastly we may ask—and here I must let some of my cats on the table—  
—does the notion of infelicity apply to utterances *which are statements*? So far we have produced the infelicity as characteristic of the *performative* utterance, which was “defined” (if we can call it so much), mainly by contrast with the supposedly familiar “statement”. Yet I will content myself here with pointing out that one of the things that has been happening lately in philosophy is that close attention has been given to “statements” which, though not false exactly nor yet ‘contradictory’, are outrageous. (p. 20)

The admission that Austin is letting some of his cats on the table registers a certain excitement regarding a significant problem that begins to emerge. That problem concerns the distinction between constative and performative utterances. The “cat” metaphor neatly conveys a certain hesitancy concerning Austin’s intentions regarding this distinction. This hesitancy is backed up by suspicion regarding the definition of the performative utterance, a suspicion marked by what appears to be nothing more than a cursory aside—“(if we can call it so much)”. Why would Austin pour scorn on his “definition” of the performative, unless, as appears to be the case, it does not manage to differentiate the performative from the “statement” in any clear or concise fashion? It is interesting to note that when Austin is making his most radical moves he often seems at his most blasé.

The example of “outrageous” statements marks the beginning of a nagging problem that haunts *How to do things with Words*, and this is a problem in which Austin, to his credit, seems almost to revel. The example of an outrageous statement which Austin refers to is “The present king of France is bald)” (ibid.). Austin’s point is that because the present king of France does not exist, the statement, rather than remaining subject to verifiability, might be described as “void”. His justification for making this claim derives from “a presupposition of existence” which pertains to the statement. (ibid.) Having apparently moved beyond the possibility of simply saying the statement is false, we might note that the unhappiness surrounding the statement in its entirety seems to take over. The outrageousness of the statement points to the fact that it is “doing” “something”, and this leads Austin to maintain that: “the more we consider a statement not as a sentence (or proposition) but as an act of speech (out of which the

others are logical constructions) the more we are studying the whole thing as an act.” (ibid.) What the example of “the recent king of France” shows is that language seems to be doing something regarding the possibilities that follow on from individual instances of speech. The outrageous example allows us to focus on the way in which words “perform”, regardless of whether they are explicit performatives or not.

It is quite characteristic of Austin to let the fox into the chicken coup and leave it there for a while whilst he ponders over more mundane matters. Having suggested that the isolation and purity of the hallowed ground—that ground where utterances had previously been fenced in and described as statements—might actually be under attack, Austin returns to the rigours of delineating different kinds of felicity conditions and performatives that go wrong. Some of the examples are extremely funny, including that of the insincere promise to give a donkey a carrot and that of the saboteur who christens a ship the “Mr Stalin”.

It takes Austin a while to return to the problematic distinction between the performative utterance and the constative statement. Austin returns to this theme near the end of Chapter 4. In this section he develops his earlier claims about “outrageous speech”, looking at constative statements such as “John’s children are bald” and “The cat sat on the mat”.

### *The Cat Sat on The Mat*

Austin begins his analysis by considering the different ways in which a constative statement entails, implies and presupposes other statements. I will use Austin’s sub-headings for the purposes of clarity.

#### Entails

Initially, he looks at what we cannot say—namely, “the cat is under the mat and the cat is on top of the mat” since “the first clause entails the contradictory of the second”. (p. 48) To avoid this problem we must recognise that “If p entails q then  $\neg$ q entails  $\neg$ p: if ‘the cat is on the mat’ entails ‘the mat is under the cat’” and therefore, equally, “the

mat is not under the cat' entails 'the cat is not on the mat'." (ibid.) Here, Austin is simply building upon his earlier analysis of outrageous speech, pointing toward the potential infelicity which accompanies an outrageous utterance.

## Implies

Austin notes G.E. Moore's recognition that saying "The cat sat on the mat" implies that I believe it to be so. Unlike the "entails" example, it may be the case that the cat is not on the mat, despite my belief that it is. However, like the other example, I cannot say the "the cat is on the mat" alongside "I do not believe that it is". In a different way the "implies" example also introduces felicity conditions into the equation, for if I say that the cat is on the mat but do not believe that it is, then I am being insincere. This causes Austin to point out that: "the unhappiness here is, though affecting a statement, exactly the same as the unhappiness infecting 'I promise. . .' when I do not intend, do not believe, &c." (p. 51) We can therefore observe that the elements of intentionality that accompany a promise and make it felicitous or infelicitous also apply to statements. Indeed, G.E. Moore's observation is already pointing towards the idea that a statement is something delivered by "somebody"!

## Presupposition

When considering "presupposition", Austin refers to the statement "All Jack's children are bald". This presupposes that, for example, Jack has children. This is unlike "entailment" in the sense that "it is not true that John's having no children presupposes that John's children are not bald." Moreover, Austin shows that both the statements "John's children are bald" and "John's children are not bald" still "presuppose that John has children: but it is not the case that both 'the cat is on the mat' and 'the cat is not on the mat' alike entail that the cat is below the mat'" (p. 51) Just as with his section "Implies", Austin wishes to show how infelicity conditions apply to statements. However, in the case of the "Jack" example the A and B conditions come to the fore: "Compare this with our infelicity when we say 'I name...', but some of the conditions (A. 1) and (A.2) are not satisfied (specially A.2 perhaps, but really equally—a parallel presupposition to A.1 exists with statements also!)" What Austin means by this is that

particular constative statements require a specific set of contextual conditions to make them felicitous.

In the final part of the chapter, Austin wishes to draw a parallel between the ways in which “I promise but I ought not” works in a similar contradictory way as “it is and it is not”. Both reflect a “self-stultifying procedure”. (ibid.) Finally he argues that:

In conclusion, we see that in order to explain what can go wrong with statements we cannot just concentrate on the proposition involved (whatever that is) as has been done traditionally. We must consider the total speech situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech act—if we are to see the parallel between statements and performative utterances, and how each can go wrong. So the total speech-act in the total speech-situation is emerging from logic piecemeal as important in special circumstances: and thus we are assimilating the supposed constative utterance to the performative. (p. 52)

Here, Austin is clearly criticising the tendency to isolate propositions from their status as an utterance. Although he doesn’t state this explicitly, the inference would seem to be that all instances of speech must be treated in terms of the contextual environment in which they take place (who is speaking, who is being spoken to, etc.) rather than abstracting those instances of speech from the conditions of their utterance. More than that, specific utterances pave the way for other utterances, and this applies to both constative and performative instances of speech. Of course, the word “supposed” suggests that speaking of the constative utterance at all is problematic if we wish to understand it as entirely distinct from the performative as both statements and utterances can go wrong in ways which are remarkably similar.

Austin’s point that “we are assimilating the supposed constative utterance to the performative” is interesting. It would appear that he is creating a certain hierarchy in which the previously unrecognised performative utterance has swallowed up or colonised the constative utterance. In fact, is he not suggesting that truth statements, the staple diet of much philosophy, can no longer be approached as discrete units of knowledge and must be thought of in terms of utterances, which “do” rather than

simply “state” something? If “*How to do Things with Words*” had ended at this juncture, then the answer to this question would have to be in the affirmative. However, the assimilation of the constative is not so straightforward. Austin’s example of the warning in response to a charging bull provides pause for thought:

“I warn you that the bull is about to charge” is the fact, if it is one, that the bull is about to charge: if the bull is *not*, then indeed the utterance “I warn you that the bull is about to charge” is open to criticism—but not in any of the ways we have hitherto characterised as varieties of unhappiness. We should not in this case say that the warning was void—i.e. that he did not warn but only went through a form of warning—nor that it was insincere: we should feel much more inclined to say the warning was false or (better) mistaken, as with a statement. So that considerations of the happiness and unhappiness type may infect statements (or some statements) and considerations of the type of truth and falsity may infect performatives (or some performatives). (p. 55)

Here, Austin is questioning the assimilation of the constative to the performative utterance. He shows that just as considerations of happiness “infect” constative utterances, considerations of truth and falsity “infect” performative utterances. We will discuss the use of the word “infect” shortly. However, for the moment, the assimilation process is working in both directions: in certain instances the performative utterance will be assimilated by conditions applicable to the constative. Nevertheless the bracketed “(or some performatives)” suggests that the colonisation of the performative is limited to specific utterances and is not, therefore, always at work. The performative is still in the ascendancy.

The use of the verb “infect” suggests that, having let his cats out, Austin rather wishes that he could put them back. Infection, with its connotations of disease, suggests that Austin is, in some way, appalled by his discoveries. Indeed, much of *How to do Things With Words* might be read as an attempt to restore order to the philosophical cosmos. By the same token, Austin’s desperate attempts to “find a precise way in which the performative utterance can be distinguished from the constative utterance” (ibid.) can

also be read as a gleeful wild goose chase. But if it is a wild chase, it is an artful one. Austin protects his findings by exposing the to challenge, exposing them to the kind of rigour that will protect him from dissenters.

### *Grammar and Explicit Performatives*

Austin's first attempt to clearly define the distinction between the performative and constative utterance involves recourse to grammar. Austin wants to find out if both utterances can be distinguished by differing grammatical constructions. Perhaps unsurprisingly he finds this impossible. Indeed, he discovers that commonly "the *same* sentence is used on different occasions of utterance in *both* ways, performative and constative." (p. 67). Indeed, in (mock-?)disconsolate fashion he bemoans the fact that "The thing seems hopeless from the start, if we are to leave utterances *as they stand*." (ibid.)

Choosing to not "leave utterances *as they stand*", Austin becomes creative and attempts to distinguish between "explicit performatives" and "primary performatives". A primary performative is "I shall be there" whereas its explicit version would be "I promise that I shall be there" in which the action of promising is, of course, made explicit. Austin detects an initial problem with this strategy noting that utterances which begin "I x that" include constative statements:

- (1) "I class" or perhaps "I hold" seems in a way one, in a way the other. Which is it, or is it both?
- (2) "I state that" seems to conform to our grammatical or quasi-grammatical requirements: but do we want *it* in? Our criterion, such as it is, seems in danger of letting in non-performatives.
- (3) Sometimes saying something seems to be characteristically doing something—for example insulting somebody, like reprimanding somebody: yet there is no performative "I insult you". Our criterion will not get in all cases of the issuing of an utterance being the doing of something, because the "reduction" to an explicit performative does not always seem possible. (p. 68)

It is plain that any attempt to consign to the performative a concise structure will be doomed to failure if the task is to clearly demarcate the constative from the performative. This is partly due to the fact that explicit performatives with their “quasi-grammatical requirements” will “let in” the most “explicit” of constative statements—“I state that”. Going down the route opened up by the designation of the explicit performative also creates problems when that performative doesn’t actually feature in the English language, as is the case with “I insult you”. It starts to become increasingly apparent that, as more effort is injected into the quest to mark a distinction between constative and performative utterances, the problematic aspects of this distinction intensify.

This intensification is in evidence when Austin finds examples of utterances which reflect ambiguity regarding whether or not they are performative or descriptive. Austin looks at the utterances ‘I approve’ and ‘I agree’ and notes that “‘I approve’ may have the performative force of giving approval or it may have the descriptive meaning: ‘I favour this’.” (p. 78) For Austin, this ambivalence cannot be resolved. Indeed, he points out that the statements trade off this very ambivalence.

### *Locutions, Illocutions and Perlocutions*

Having discovered that recourse to grammar/the explicit performative has yielded no absolute distinctions between constative and performative statements, Austin decides to change the focus of his project. He decides to concentrate on what the claim that to say something is to do something actually amounts to. This leads to his famous and important distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts.

### *Locutionary Acts*

The locutionary act is of limited interest to Austin, excepting the fact that it provides the bedrock for illocutionary and perlocutionary acts. Quite simply the locutionary act: “includes the utterance of certain noises, the utterance of certain words in a certain construction, and the utterance of them with a certain ‘meaning’ in the favourite

philosophical sense and with a certain reference.” (p. 94) Austin divides the locutionary act up into three subsections—the phonetic act, the phatic act and the rhetic act:

The phonetic act is merely the act of uttering certain noises. The phatic act is the uttering of certain vocables or words, i.e. noises of certain types, belonging to and as belonging to, a certain vocabulary, conforming to and as conforming to a certain grammar. The rhetic act is the performance of an act using those vocables with a certain more-or-less definite sense and reference. (p. 95)

Obviously, all speech acts involve phonetic acts. The distinction between the phatic and the rhetic act involve the sense and reference (or lack thereof) of what has been said.

### *Illocutionary acts*

Austin points out that analysing the locutionary act throws no light on the constative/performative distinction. This is due to the fact that (in Austin’s view) looking at different locutions will not help us decide upon what an utterance is doing. Obviously, all utterances are locutions of some kind, but analysing them as simply locutions is philosophically unhelpful. Before considering the implications of Austin’s position on this matter, we need to look at what is meant by his second (and perhaps) most innovative category, the illocutionary act.

Austin paves the way for the illocutionary act by pointing out that when we perform a locutionary act we use speech, but he asks “in what way precisely are we using it on this occasion?” (p. 99) He goes on to point out that the “sense” in which we are “using” words is an extremely important consideration: “It makes a great difference whether we were advising, or merely suggesting, or actually ordering, whether we were strictly promising or only announcing a vague intention, and so forth.” (ibid.) Looking at utterances as locutionary acts cannot deal with this dimension of the utterance. Austin writes:



I explained the performance of an act in this new way and second sense as the performance of an “illocutionary” act i.e. performance of an act *in* saying something as opposed to performance of an act of saying something; I call the act performed an “illocution” and shall refer to the doctrine of different types of function of language here in question as the doctrine of “illocutionary forces”. (p. 100)

The distinction between acts “of” saying something and acts “in” saying something reflects different levels on which our words might be described as acts. Although we evidently “do” something simply by speaking, that which is done by our speaking is a different matter. For Austin, looking at illocutions marks a new direction for philosophy. The privileging of the “statement” as the only significant linguistic unit is blind to what our words are “doing” because it abstracts them from the context of the utterance. This leads us back to the “whole speech situation”, which we discussed earlier. For Austin, philosophers have for too long have “neglected this study” (ibid.) by focusing on locutions. For Austin, this fails to take into account the “force” of words—“the doctrine of illocutionary forces”. The problem as such relates to the elevated place in philosophy occupied by attention to what words mean regardless of the illocutionary force that accompanies them.

### *Perlocutions*

The perlocutionary aspect of the utterance refers to what is done “by” words. Though perlocutionary utterances (such as “I frighten you”) do not exist in the language, we can still talk about the perlocutionary effects of the utterance. Austin is not terribly interested in perlocutions for reasons that will be discussed in Chapter 5.

### **Speech Act Theory**

As we have seen, Austin draws a contrast between statements that previous philosophy in the analytic tradition had regarded as the only units worthy of study and

performative utterances that “do things”. He then moves on to note that all utterances are in a sense performative. However, having made this discovery and having “attempted” to separate clearly the constative from the performative, Austin apparently gives up on the performative in order to look at locutions, illocutions and perlocutions. *How to Do Things With Words* became something of a landmark in philosophy. Though in some senses, Austin (for those within the analytic tradition) was supplanted by those thinkers following in his wake, he had let something out of the bag that could not be put back. The tradition of logical analysis had treated utterances as propositions in which a (necessarily) sincere speaker produces an utterance expressing a belief to which truth conditions are formally attached. His words are chosen to ensure that those truth conditions are present, and the interpreter simply has to receive the utterance and recognise which phones, morphemes, phrases and words are involved. Using his knowledge of meanings, the speaker is then in a position to deduce the truth conditions of the utterance. Austin’s accounts of felicity, force, sincerity and, that is, the performative aspects of the utterance mess this picture up. His followers tend to avoid discussion of the performative utterance. Like Austin, they leave the troublesome constative/performative chimera alone. It is not the performative that becomes the focus of philosophy in this tradition but the “speech act”.

Speech Act theory considers the philosophical complexities of language that descriptive theories simply ignored. Language, it turns out, is doing other things than simply describing reality. One cannot “simply” look at issues to do with truth and falsity in a cold analytic light—at least, not with analytic business as usual. Questions of “force” have entered the picture. And because of the aforementioned complexities, the question of whether or not one can establish a “theory” of speech acts is still a contentious issue. Here is Green, for example, who, having just explained to the reader that he has “shuddered with quotation marks around the expression ‘speech act theory’”, writes:

It is one thing to say that speech acts are a phenomenon of importance for students of language and communication; another to say that we have a theory of them. While, as we shall see below, we are able to situate speech acts within their niche, having a theory of them would enable us to explain (rather than merely describe) some of their most

significant features. Consider a different case. Semantic theory deserves its name: For instance, with the aid of set-theoretic tools it helps us tell the difference between good arguments and bad arguments couched in ordinary language. By contrast, it is not clear that “speech act theory” has comparable credentials. One such credential would be a delineation of logical relations among speech acts, if such there be. (Green, 2007b)

The tone here is interesting. At first it seems as though Green shudders at the thought of a “theory” of speech acts, as though theory were something to be avoided. However, it becomes apparent that there is a certain admiration for semantic theory and the possibilities it seems to present for theorising and getting to the bottom of what constitutes a good or a bad argument. Though the possibility of a speech act logic is suggested, the tone is clearly tentative as though such a thing were somewhat far-fetched. I will return to this, but it is worth briefly mentioning that Austin is certainly troubled by the notion of “theorising”. There always seem to be examples that stray from the theory. Nevertheless, as we shall see, this suspicion was certainly not shared by some of his most ardent followers.

Let us consider some of the preoccupations of Speech Act “theory”. For reasons pertaining to relevance (to the thesis), parts of the following description may seem to be dealt with a little too quickly. I regret this, but we are talking about a vast field, most of which has little directly to do with what will be discussed in the forthcoming chapters.

Issues of content of force and content are important to speech act theory. How might one characterise force? And what relationship does it have with meaning? So, for example, it might seem that when makes an utterance such as “You’ll get your homework in on time next week, won’t you?”, this could be taken as a request, a threat, a command or perhaps a number of other things. Consequently we might wonder whether or not the force that would make it a request, etc., is external to the utterance or part of it. Certainly, whether or not it is a request, a command, etc., is part of its meaning. However, it would seem that there is nothing internal to its content that makes it one of these things or another. This is the sort of thing that speech act theorists

ponder over. We might say that whereas semantic theory looks at the content of utterances, “pragmatics” (which is ultimately the study of speech acts) is principally concerned with their force.

## **Are all Acts of Speech Speech Acts?**

Another area of concern for philosophers interested in Speech Acts is whether or not saying it means doing it, or to put it another way, whether or not all acts of speech are necessarily speech acts. In an earlier part of this chapter we considered the role of explicit performatives in Austin’s philosophy—christening, marrying, promising, etc., and the possibility of misfires and abuses. However, in various ways Austin’s conditions for success might not seem sufficiently all encompassing. Examination of the kinds of conditions that Austin discusses for the happiness, abusiveness and potential to misfire is built on by Searle and Vanderveken, who identify seven components of illocutionary force. These are:

1. *Illocutionary point*: This is the characteristic aim of each type of speech act. For instance, the characteristic aim of an assertion is to describe how things are; the characteristic point of a promise is to commit oneself to a future course of action.
2. *Degree of strength of the illocutionary point*: Two illocutions can have the same point but differ along the dimension of strength. For instance, requesting and insisting that the addressee do something both have the point of attempting to get the addressee to do that thing; however, the latter is stronger than the former.
3. *Mode of achievement*: This is the special way, if any, in which the illocutionary point of a speech act must be achieved. Testifying and asserting both have the point of describing how things are; however, the former also involves invoking one’s authority as a witness while the latter does not. To testify is to assert *in one’s capacity* as a witness. Commanding and requesting both aim to get the addressee to do something; yet only someone issuing a command does so *in her capacity* as a person in a position of authority.

4. *Propositional content conditions*: Some illocutions can only be achieved with an appropriate propositional content. For instance, I can only promise what is in the future and under my control. I can only apologise for what is in some sense under my control and already the case. For this reason, promising to make it the case that the sun did not rise yesterday is not possible; neither can I apologise for the truth of Snell's Law.

5. *Preparatory conditions*: These are all other conditions that must be met for the speech act not to misfire. Such conditions often concern the social status of interlocutors. For instance, a person cannot bequeath an object unless she already owns it or has power of attorney; a person cannot marry a couple unless she is legally invested with the authority to do so.

6. *Sincerity conditions*: Many speech acts involve the expression of a psychological state. Assertion expresses belief; apology expresses regret, a promise expresses an intention, and so on. A speech act is sincere only if the speaker is in the psychological state that her speech act expresses.

7. *Degree of strength of the sincerity conditions*: Two speech acts might be the same along other dimensions, but express psychological states that differ from one another in the dimension of strength. Requesting and imploring both express desires, and are identical along the other six dimensions above; however, the latter expresses a stronger desire than the former. (Searle and Vanderveken in Green, 2007b)

Searle and Vanderveken argue that: "each illocutionary force may be defined as a septuple of values, each of which is a "setting" of a value within one of the seven characteristics" (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 13). What we see here is ultimately a more sophisticated development of Austin's felicity conditions.

Another development of the issues discussed by Austin in *How to do Things With Words* can be seen through is evidenced in Speech Act theory through the discussion of indirect speech acts and conversational implicature. I would argue that this rises out of Austin's discussion of perlocutionary effect of the utterance. Perlocutions are, in a sense, the characteristic aims of speech acts (Austin, 1962, p. 101). Ultimately there is

no such thing as a perlocutionary utterance. Take two sentences such as “I urge you to give me my pen back” and “I persuade you to give me my pen back”. The second is not a grammatical sentence in English. In urging, I am using an illocutionary utterance to try and get you to act. However I cannot issue a “perlocutionary utterance”.

As we shall discuss later in this thesis, Austin tends to concentrate on utterances that take the form of the present indicative active: “I ...”. However, as Searle notes (Searle, 1975, p. 62), there are certain kinds of utterance whereby attempts to get somebody to do things do not necessarily take this form. So, for example, if I say “you are standing on my foot”, I am not simply informing you of something, I am trying to get you to move your foot. However, the formula “I...” does not apply here. Searle calls these utterances indirect speech acts.

Perlocutions are characteristic aims of one or more illocution, but are not themselves illocutions. For instance, my remark that you are standing on my foot is normally taken as, in addition, a demand that you move; my question whether you can pass the salt is normally taken as a request that you do so. These are examples of so-called indirect speech acts (ibid.). Indirect speech acts are handled most extensively in the literature on conversational implicature, a term coined by Grice (see Grice, 1957, 1989). Conversational implicature refers to processes whereby we mean more than we say. So for example, if two people have just gone on a date and one says to the other “Would you like to come to my place for a cup of coffee?”, coffee may be the last thing on her mind.

Work on conversational implicature moves beyond a straight discussion of speech acts into the messier world of conversation. Analytic philosophy can be a rather slow moving elephant. Mill in *A System of Logic* (2002) tried to discern the meaning of a word in isolation. Frege (1976) maintained that to understand a word’s meaning you had to look at the whole sentence. Speech act “theorists”, having moved beyond the discussion of propositions, make claims for speech acts as the primarily significant units: “Illocutionary acts are important for the purpose of philosophical semantics because they are the primary units of meaning in the use and comprehension of natural language.” (Vanderveken, 1990, p. 1.). So what about conversations? Well, there is clearly a danger here that heads might explode. Nonetheless, a certain order can

seemingly be discerned in conversations, whereby speech acts can be looked at in terms of discernible pairs (nobody is getting too carried away here). Questions and answers are obvious examples of this. Searle (1992, pp.7-30) was extremely unhappy about the notion that conversations might come to trump speech acts. He felt that study of the latter would lead to something of a dead end—conversations do not have a purpose. But rather than following that thought to the end, dead or otherwise, let us consider another favourite trope within speech act theory: the relationship between word and world.

## **Word and World**

Work within speech acts on force often focuses on issues pertaining to direction of fit and whether or not certain conditions are satisfied. A famous example used by Anscombe (which is very revealing of its time) involves a woman who sends her husband to the shops to buy food (Anscombe, 1963). At the same time she sends a detective to check up on what he is buying. Ultimately both the husband and detective have the same list. However, there is a difference in the relationship between world and word in what they have done. For the husband, the items he buys must conform to his list, and therefore there is a world-word direction of fit. For the detective, his list must conform to the world. We have a word-world direction of fit.

Bearing all this in mind we can see that different speech acts have different directions of fit. If you say “I predict that it will rain tomorrow”, your utterance has a word-world direction of fit. If, on the other hand, I command you to do something, the reverse is the case. To complicate things, certain utterances have no obvious direction of fit. These are ugly ducklings that engender a lot of squawking, and they are, as far as I can see, unlikely to become swans.

Another important issue for speech acts “theory” involves a discussion of “force conventionalism”, and Austin is largely responsible for starting this off. “Strong” force conventionalism, which Austin’s work exemplifies, implies that some convention must be in place in order for a speech act to occur. In discussing felicity conditions, Austin writes: “There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain

conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.” (Austin, 1962, p. 14). This is echoed by Searle who maintains that” “utterance acts stand to propositional and illocutionary acts in the way in which, e.g., making an *X* on a ballot paper stands to voting.” (Searle, 1969, p. 24) For Searle there are underlying constitutive rules to a language that frame its semantic structure. Speech acts are “characteristically performed by uttering sentences in accordance with these sets of constitutive rules”. (ibid.)

There are some strong opponents to force conventionalism, most notably Strawson:

I do not want to deny that there may be conventional postures or procedures for entreating: one can, for example, kneel down, raise one’s arms, and say, “I entreat you.” But I do want to deny that an act of entreaty can be performed only as conforming to such conventions. . . [T]o suppose that there is always and necessarily a convention conformed to would be like supposing that there could be no love affairs which did not proceed on lines laid down in the *Roman de la Rose* or that every dispute between men must follow the pattern specified in Touchstone’s speech about the countercheck quarrelsome and the lie direct. (Strawson, 1964, p. 444)

For Strawson, an appeal to extra-semantic conventions when accounting for whether or not speech acts are possible is a wrong move. He maintains that instead we should focus on participants’ intentions when communicating. He argues that the way to tell whether or not an utterance in the indicative mood is a prediction and not a command will be because it was intended to be a prediction. There is a lot of work in pragmatics/speech act theory on speaker-meaning and what it is to “mean” something (see, for example, Grice, 1957). However, there is no space for a discussion of this here. I will, however, come back to Searle and Strawson on force conventionalism at the end of the chapter.



## Logic and Force

In Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, he not only constructs a formal system that uses symbols to indicate the content of propositions, he also creates symbols that indicate the force with which words are put forth (such symbols are known as force indicators (Green, 2002)). Whether or not force is measurable in this way is a contested issue. For example, Davidson maintains that natural languages contain many devices for ascertaining force. If some kind of logical indicator could guarantee force then all well and good. However, for Davidson this is impossible and undesirable:

It is easy to see that merely speaking the sentence in the strengthened mood cannot be counted on to result in an assertion; every joker, storyteller, and actor will immediately take advantage of the strengthened mood to simulate assertion. There is no point, then, in the strengthened mood; the available indicative does as well as language can do in the service of assertion (Davidson, 1979, p. 311).

Davidson does not have the last word here. Dummett (1993), Hare (1989) and Green (1997) take the discussion into more complicated territory. Let us leave them to it, for further attempts to summarise are likely to appear glib. Speech Act theory's turn away from the "proposition" as the fundamental unit of communicative significance had little impact on the study of logic. The question that some Speech Act theorists wanted to answer was whether or not speech acts had their own logic. This involved looking at, for example, inferential relations between speech acts. This is what leads Searle and Vanderveken to this position:

A theory of illocutionary logic of the sort we are describing is essentially a theory of illocutionary commitment as determined by illocutionary force. The single most important question it must answer is this: Given that a speaker in a certain context of utterance performs a successful illocutionary act of a certain form, what other illocutions does the performance of that act commit him to? (Searle and Vanderveken, 1985, p. 6)

In this discussion of “commitment” they relate their seven values cited above to entailment relations amongst speech acts, to “illocutionary point” etc. This involves a focus on “strong” and “weak” illocutionary commitment. Ultimately what they try to do is provide a “definition” of illocutions that will allow Speech Act “theory” to deserve its name by doing more than simply “describing” speech acts.

## Assertion and Truth

As we have already noted, Speech Act theory replaces the *proposition* dominant in logical theory, with the speech act subject to all kinds of conditions. That of course is not to say that Speech Act theory gives up on truth. Quite the contrary. Rather, a certain kind of speech act comes to be privileged above all others, namely the *assertion*. An assertion is a speech act in which the speaker claims “that” something holds. The extent to which an assertion differs from a proposition or indeed a statement is something of a controversial issue in analytic philosophy. To what extent are issues pertaining to “force” relevant when discussing truth? This is, in some respects, the subject of the debate between Austin and Strawson on “truth”. For Austin, (unsurprisingly) issues pertaining to truth are indissociable from linguistic conventions. It is not simply the case that the same *proposition* (which is either true or false) shows up in different contexts. Rather, those contexts are central to what is going on with each particular utterance. In contrast Strawson takes the opposite line, whereby force and context should generally be seen as add-ons rather than factors essential to the truth of utterances (Strawson, 1964). Within analytic philosophy, Strawson is generally thought to have won this debate.

## Conclusion

In the introduction I maintained that debates within Speech Act theory are not germane to the discussion of performatives and performativities that feature throughout this thesis. The most basic reason for this is that the “performative” utterance is simply not a central concern for Speech Act theory. Austin’s decision (in the last part of *How to Do Things with Words*) to leave alone the troubled relationship between constative and performative concerns is largely treated as the end of the matter for the philosophy that

follows on from that book. In contrast the afore-mentioned “troubled” relationship is clearly a concern for philosophers outside that tradition, and it is a concern for this thesis.

On a number of levels the analytic philosophy that succeeds Austin simply ignores a number of crucial dimensions of Austin’s work. Firstly, though categorising speech acts is clearly a concern for Austin (who loves to provide extensive lists of these things), he is clearly not a “theorist”. What I mean by this is that Austin is not predisposed to look for a means of identifying force conventionalism or to seek a logical system against which speech acts can be properly categorised. To do the latter (which is certainly a concern of Searle’s) represents a drive towards the kind of universalising metaphysics that Austin was clearly uncomfortable with. Conventions and “underlying structures” are different sorts of thing.

Just as Austin is not interested in seeking a metaphysics for acts of speech, *How to Do Things with Words* is also an attempt, as Cavell notes, to bring philosophy’s concern with truth down to size. However, much ordinary language philosophy following Austin (in the work of Searle and others) simply reinstates truth through work on “assertions” or returns for the most part to the “proposition” (as with Strawson). Though I am not suggesting that this work is not interesting or important, it is often blind to the many other aspects of ordinary experience that are important aspects of what an education might involve. Such aspects are bound up with performative force, and it is these that will be addressed in the chapters that follow.

Austin’s interest in the “conventional” aspects of utterances will be thematised in this thesis. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 take him to task on this point. As I have already shown, Austin’s analytic followers, such as Searle, simply accept or tweak the former’s account of force conventionalism. Derrida and Butler, through their discussion of locutions, show up Austin’s overdetermined treatment of context. In contrast Cavell’s work on perlocutions takes us to disorderly dimensions of language that Austin’s “conventional” approach cannot embrace or even tolerate. Cavell’s account is more sophisticated than Strawson’s critique of Austin in regard to these concerns.

Lastly, some of the most interesting characteristics of Austin's philosophy are bound up with its "tone". Reading Austin can be a delightful experience because it can be so funny, and it is funny because of the way it "delights" in language. This humour is not an extraneous matter but is fundamental to what is being said. If one treats Austin's discussion as simply the presentation of a series of arguments one misses the "force" of his words and the important things he has to say about the force of those words. This aspect of force is about more than simply language's ability to get things done. To embrace and thematise such force takes us into areas that are central to this thesis. On the whole, "Speech Act" philosophy has no real interest in such force. I believe this is to its detriment.

## Chapter 2

# Performativity, Agonistics and Silence

### Introduction

In the last chapter I offered a reading of Austin's performative utterance and considered its legacy within Speech Act theory and philosophy drawing on pragmatics. At the end of the chapter I suggested that the take up of Austin's philosophy of language misses something of the richness and complexity of his concerns in *How to Do Things with Words*. The kind of project that analytic philosophers following Austin work within partakes in a language game (to borrow a Wittgensteinian expression) that Austin is not (exactly) playing. Analytic philosophy has no interest in "voice" which though not directly thematised in Austin's work is nonetheless a key ingredient in an endeavour that, rather than seeking analytic categories, provides a kind of satire of the process of seeking analytic categories. At the very least Austin exposes the messiness of language and the unhappiness that one will encounter in the search for analytic/logical formulas for the vast array of utterances that make up our ordinary linguistic universe.

This chapter marks a rather abrupt departure from the philosophical world presented in the last chapter. If we were following one path through the terrain, we will come to a

bridge and take another one. As the chapter develops, I shall try to show that the bridge in question might be represented by the research on pragmatics conducted by the German philosopher Habermas. Although Habermas certainly makes a contribution to speech act theory (which is in certain respects a development of Austin) his interest in pragmatics is simultaneously narrower and more ambitious than research deriving from that field. For Habermas, speech acts/pragmatics play a prominent role in his attempt to resuscitate the Enlightenment project and overcome the instrumental rationality that infects the modern world. It is also within this narrower context that Lyotard, who draws on pragmatics, comes to develop his understanding of “performativity”. As I shall attempt to show (whilst trying to keep a few cats in the bag) Lyotard’s adoption of pragmatics/speech act theory is a more or less direct response to Habermas. Before looking into what this amounts to, let us consider what the term “performativity” means.

## **What is Performativity?**

By way of Lyotard, “performativity” has come to denote the systemic relations within the social order of postmodernity. However, the aim of this chapter is to treat Lyotard’s concept of performativity as the start rather than the end of a discussion on what performativity might come to mean for educational theory and practice. Let us begin with the outline of performativity presented by Lyotard.

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard examines the processes of delegitimation undergone by the grand narratives of modernity, arguing that the postmodern world largely behaves in accordance with a system that has exiled those grand narratives. The narratives in question relate to the place and role of knowledge in the university. Lyotard’s narratives include the self-legitimizing speculative narrative present in the work of Hegel (among others) and the narrative of emancipation: the notion that scientific progress will benefit mankind and will improve the lives of individual subjects. Lyotard argues that these narratives have been replaced by the logic of performativity, which has taken hold of knowledge:

The production of proof, which is in principle only part of an argumentation process designed to win agreement from the addressees of scientific messages, thus falls under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no longer truth but performativity—that is the best possible input/output equation. The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46)

So, for Lyotard truth and justice have been replaced by effectiveness and efficiency. The narratives of legitimation that provided frameworks for the former concerns are no longer credible and we have moved from a “modern” to a “postmodern” condition. This is what leads Lyotard to issue the pronouncement for which he is most famous: “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives.” (p. xxiv) It should be noted that the first phrase in the sentence “Simplifying to the extreme” is usually left out of the citation in the form that has achieved such popularity. This perhaps partly explains why Lyotard is often taken to be the arch exponent or celebrant of the relativism and performativity that the Enlightenment makes room for (or alternatively gives birth to).

This would be a misreading for as Gordon Bearn notes Lyotard, despite giving his assent to the plurality that accompanies the demise of all-encompassing theories, does not celebrate what has appeared in their place. It is interesting that Bearn presents Lyotard's philosophy in “aesthetic” terms maintaining that “it is not painted in the slack polychromatic colours of eclecticism” and neither is it “painted the reassuring black of a glorious tragedy”. Ultimately, we are told: “Lyotard's philosophy is painted a melancholic grey” (Bearn, 2000, p. 232).

Bearn does not say as much, but Lyotard's philosophy cannot embrace “tragedy” for several reasons. Firstly, tragedy would imply a nostalgia for something substantial that has now been lost. When Lyotard notes the postmodern incredulity to grand narratives he is not suggesting that all-encompassing systems were ever fit for purpose—they

simply appeared credible. Consequently nostalgia gets us nowhere in either a philosophical or practical sense. Why then, can we not celebrate the current state of society and education? The problem can perhaps be stated in this way—performativity is a grand narrative of sorts, just a hollowed out one. Performativity “functions” like a grand narrative: “If a form of knowledge could not be translated into bits of information, it was bound to become more and more invisible to the system. . .” (p. 231) Consequently, performativity provides just as overwhelming and brutal a systematic horizon as any grand narrative that preceded it. “Openness” and “diversity” are the order of the day but are only deemed acceptable when read against this horizon.

Lyotard’s performativity diagnosis is not wholly original. What he describes is, in certain respects, analogous to Nietzsche’s account of nihilism, Heidegger’s discussion of the “technological understanding of Being” and various distressed discussions of the state of modernity written by the founding members of the Frankfurt School. Let us briefly consider each of these.

Let us begin with Nietzsche: “*the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking, and ‘Why’ finds no answer” (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 9). The collapse of relevance meaning and truth will bring about a destructive force that will sweep through Europe. The account of nihilism is in part predictive: “What I relate is the history of the next two centuries. I describe what is coming, what can no longer come differently: *the advent of nihilism*. . . . For some time now our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that wants to reach the end. . . . (ibid.). The lack of real goals and purposes lets nihilism in. This is due to: “the formulation of value as the opposite of its opposite that Nietzsche—again—saw as the core of nihilism. What do we stand for? We are no longer sure: only that it is not what others represent. We are the reds, which means that we are definitely not the blues (Blake *et al.*, xii). If there is no overriding aim intrinsic to what we do, success and failure, efficiency or inefficiency represent the only imaginable goals. To succeed is not to fail and vice versa. This is nihilism.

Following Nietzsche (to some extent) Heidegger sees nihilism as intrinsic to what he calls the technological understanding of Being. In an interview with Brian Magee on



the subject of Heidegger's philosophy, Hubert Dreyfus nicely expresses what is at stake here:

We don't seek truth any more but simply efficiency. For us everything is to be made as flexible as possible so as to be used as efficiently as possible. If I had a Styrofoam cup here, it would be a very good example. A styrofoam cup is a perfect sort of object, given our understanding of being, namely it keeps hot things hot and cold things cold, and you can dispose of it when you are done with it. It efficiently and flexibly satisfies our desires. It's utterly different from, say, a Japanese tea-cup, which is delicate, traditional, and socialises people. It doesn't keep the tea hot for long, and probably doesn't satisfy anybody's desires, but that's not important. (Dreyfus, 1987, p. 267)

So knowledge has become efficient and disposable like a Styrofoam cup. What does not conform to these criteria and is "inefficient" (though it may indicate a richer mode of existence) is relegated to the past and becomes somehow quaint. Knowledge as such, and this is a view replicated in *The Postmodern Condition*, has become "information". Language as "an instrument of information increasingly gains the upper hand (Heidegger, 1991, p. 124). People become "thinking machines" that contribute to the "building of frameworks for large calculations". However, information is not innocent for whilst it "informs, that is appraises, it at the same time forms, that means arranges and sets straight". Information therefore takes on a colonising force that brings everything under control, shaping it in its own image: "As an appraisal, information is also the arrangement that places all objects and stuffs in a form for humans that suffices to securely establish human domination over the whole earth and even beyond this planet" (ibid.).

Members of the Frankfurt School such as Adorno give a similar account to Heidegger's. Reason in Western civilisation has succumbed to a fusion of domination and technical rationality. External and internal nature have been brought under the power of the human subject. During this process no social subject (proletarian or not) can become the agent of emancipation. In *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (the title says it all!), Adorno writes:

For since the overwhelming objectivity of historical movement in its present phase consists so far only in the dissolution of the subject, without yet giving rise to a new one, individual experience necessarily bases itself on the old subject, now historically condemned, which is still for-itself, but no longer in-itself. The subject still feels sure of its autonomy, but the nullity demonstrated to subjects by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself. (Adorno, 2006, pp. 15-16)

The image of the concentration camps as the horrific progeny of modernity is also present in Lyotard's writing on "Auschwitz" which captures a condition (rather than simply denoting the place). Auschwitz (the place) was, of course, extremely "efficient". Lyotard's work on "Auschwitz" is most impressively developed in *Heidegger and the Jews* (Lyotard, 1990). It expresses the theme of the immemorial, of what cannot be hauled back into memory. We must remember that we cannot remember. Attempts to remember "Auschwitz" (such as Spielberg's *Schindler's List*) do violence to its immemorial nature.

So, as we can see, Lyotard's discussion of performativity does not exactly cover new ground. Its force and originality perhaps comes with its discussion of the state of the university and the predictions pertaining to what will eventually happen to that institution (many of which have come true). Moreover, Lyotard's response to performativity is also rather original. Both Nietzsche and Heidegger take a backward look to elements of (an imagined?) pre-Socratic culture, so as to reimagine the future. In the case of Heidegger this can seem nostalgic, whereas Nietzsche's turn to "Tragedy" is less so. Adorno seems rather cowed by instrumental rationality though later members of The Frankfurt School such as Habermas (who will be discussed shortly) are more optimistic.

## Why "performativity"?

In the notes to *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard acknowledges his debt to the philosopher J.L. Austin, who coined the term—"performative". Lyotard writes:

The term performative has taken on a precise meaning in language theory since Austin. Later in this book, the concept will reappear in association with the term performativity (in particular, of a system) in the new current sense of efficiency measured according to an input/output ratio. The two meanings are not far apart. Austin's performative realises the optimal performance. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 88)

Lyotard's reference to Austin can perhaps be partly explained by the structure and findings of the series of lectures that makes up *How to do things with Words*. If so, it should be noted that this represents a rather vulgar and generalised account of that book. I shall provide just such an account that leaves out the sophisticated nuances and richness of Austin's text, but may throw some light on why Lyotard should derive the term performativity from an encounter with Austin. What follows will then be a thinned out version of Austin's argument.

As noted in the first chapter, Austin attempts to categorise performative utterances that "do" things, as distinct from constative utterances that state things. He then goes on to show the impossibility of achieving an absolute performative break between the two categories that he identifies. Performative utterances are not directly concerned with what is true or false but are subject to conditions of infelicity or unhappiness. Infelicity occurs when the performative utterance fails to achieve its intended effect. Failure results from some lack or inadequacy within the total speech situation. An example might be a wedding in which the figure presiding over the ceremony does not have the legal authority to marry the participants. The conditions do not allow for the words to have their intended effect.

What makes Austin so excited during the course of his lectures is arguably the colonising behaviour of the performative utterance. This colonising behaviour results from the straightforward discovery that, although performative utterances such as "I now declare you man and wife" can be rendered distinct from the constative, the opposite is not true; the constative statement is always bound up with certain

conditions that apply to the performative. By this token, the claim that truth occupies some purified zone of stating cannot be considered tenable. “Statements” or “assertions” are positioned by contextual factors that take over the whole speech situation. Austin is not saying that we cannot speak of truth—that there is no point in making reference to the constative statement—but he does demonstrate that conditions applicable to the language of doing apply to the language of stating; that in a complex way, constative statements are necessarily performative.

When Lyotard notes the similarity between Austin’s performative and his own concept of performativity, the above analysis of Austin would appear to throw some light on his meaning. Neither Austin’s performative, nor the systematic performativity described by Lyotard, are straightforwardly dealing with truth claims. Rather, what is at stake is success measured by internal cohesion; that what actors perform adheres to certain normative procedures that can be measured in terms of success. Lyotard may also be thinking of Austin’s deferral of the question concerning the distinction between the performative and the constative utterance. Having failed to make a clear distinction between the constative and performative through reference to grammar and semantics, Austin decides to analyse the performative utterance in greater detail. He looks at the different aspects of the performative; the locutionary aspect, which concerns the form of the words, the illocutionary force of performatives (speech acts which perform an action through their very utterance) and the perlocutionary effects of performatives (what is done by the performative utterance). Austin says very little about the locutionary aspect of the performative. Instead, he looks more closely at the force enacted by words and their capacity to “do things”. This process moves away even further from questions of truth and knowledge and focuses entirely on how things are achieved by words. In an entirely different context, the effectiveness of a speech act is the measure of Lyotard’s performativity.

### **The Postmodern Condition: A response to Habermas?**

So far, I have provided a rather sketchy explanation of why Lyotard draws on Austin’s theory of the performative to develop his understanding of performativity. Though, this explanation seems logical (and I think there is something in it!), it misses something of

what is going on (what is being performed) in Lyotard's allusion to Austin. In his foreword to *The Postmodern Condition*, Jameson argues that Lyotard's discussion of scientific research is "a thinly veiled polemic against Habermas's concept of a "legitimation crisis" and vision of a "noise-free, transparent, fully communicational society" (Jameson, 1984, p. vii). The reason that Jameson uses the term "thinly veiled" is that Lyotard makes negative allusions to Habermas's terms of reference despite the fact that there is little in the way of direct reference to or quotation of Habermas's work. Anyway, the significance of Austin's performative to this scenario is that Austin's theory of speech acts and treatment of the performative utterance plays an integral role in the development of Habermas's theory of communicative action<sup>2</sup>.

Habermas's theory of communication represents an attempt to revive the Enlightenment project of modernity, a project that for Lyotard can and should not be resuscitated. Before moving on to say something about the role Austin's performative plays in Habermas's work it will be helpful to give a sense of the context in which the latter is working. Habermas like Lyotard believes that society is in the grip of technical management and control. Instrumental reason and means-end rationality have infiltrated the realms of morality and politics. Questions concerning what is good and just seem to have disappeared and "reason" is employed as an instrument of domination. For Habermas, this does not mean that we should give up on the Enlightenment legacy but rather that the philosopher's task is to "recapture the differentiated realms of rationality" (Steuerman, 1992, p. 101) and revive the possibility for "critique" that the Enlightenment project engendered. This approach is clearly Kantian in nature echoing as it does Kant's three Critiques each of which focuses on a different domain of rationality, theoretical, practical and aesthetic. That said, Habermas is not simply trying to resuscitate Kant—the latter falls within the purview of subject-centred reason, which for Habermas ultimately becomes deformed due to its conversion into instrumental reason.

It might, at this point be worth providing a brief (and due to the limitations of space, a rather glib) account of the development of subject-centred reason through the

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<sup>2</sup> This is not fully developed until the publication of *A Theory of Communicative Action* in 1981. This postdates the initial publication in French of *The Postmodern Condition*.

Enlightenment. If we begin (and this is slightly arbitrary) with Descartes, then we think here of the cogito, in which, as the result of Descartes' famous scepticism, the thinking subject is placed at the centre of the philosophical universe—every other aspect of world is seen as though through the window of the scientists spaceship (through a glass darkly?). Moving swiftly on, Empiricism, as it emerges in the philosophy of Locke, pictures external reality as the subject of reason. Of course, things aren't quite as straightforward as this—for Locke we do not really get to things themselves—they imprint ideas onto our minds and therefore the thinking subject is still in a sense the centre of the philosophical universe. However, "his" role is largely subordinate. In Kant the subject of reason is split into phenomenal and noumenal domains. I can only apprehend what is out there through the phenomenological lens of space, time, etc. Of course there has to be "stuff" out there to be apprehended in this way—the subject of reason is thereby double—empirical/transcendental. Hegel (and yes, we have already got on to Hegel) unifies the empirical and transcendental, synthesising them into absolute reason/absolute mind. For Hegel the final synthesis is something that is worked toward—reason is invariably historical.

So, Habermas wants to restore the differentiated realms of reason against the totalising "mega subject" imposed by the legacy of Hegel. Hegel's synthesis of the various domains of reason blocks critique that the differentiation of different realms of reason kept open, a possibility that was still available to Kant: "the question about the genuine self-understanding of modernity gets lost in reason's ironic laughter. For reason has now taken over the place of fate and knows that every event of essential significance has now been decided" (Habermas, reference) Of course, Habermas is not simply arguing against Hegel (or indeed Marx—I left out Marx earlier, but of course the subject of reason in Marx via Hegel is the proletariat). This is because the kind of synthesis that Hegel was after appears in a degraded form—instrumental reason which is coterminous with various forms of relativism. These are of course, the very reasons why Lyotard maintains that performativity fills the space vacated through incredulity towards grand narratives.

Kant, despite his differentiated take on reason, still falls victim to the problems surrounding relativism that will apply to each of his domains. If theoretical reason is concerned with "truth" then whose "truth" are we talking about? To what extent can

“rightness” (practical reason) be universal? In which ways is aesthetic feeling culturally specific? Habermas cannot get round these problems and does not try to. However, he nevertheless wishes to reconstruct universals and comes to believe that this can only be done within the philosophy of language through “reconstructing” a universal pragmatics:

Implied in this move is a recognition that the problems encountered in his initial project were due to a framework still too indebted to a philosophy of the subject, that is, to a reflection on the possibilities of reason in action which did not acknowledge that the very possibility of reflection is not a subjectivity turned onto itself but an intersubjectivity of discourse, of language, of communication. Habermas therefore now stresses the necessity of overcoming the framework of a philosophy of the subject in terms of a philosophy of *intersubjectivity* of language. To this end he proposes an analysis of the conditions of possibility of communication as the starting point for a critical theory. (Steuermaier, 1992, p. 103)

This move toward a universal pragmatics (that marks a departure from “a subjectivity turned onto itself”) already makes an appearance in an article from 1970 entitled ‘Towards a theory of communicative competence’. This article also includes an explicit handling of Austin’s theory of the performative utterance. In contrast to what has just been done, the next section attempts to be reasonably thorough though it is likely to be dull.

## **Communicative Competence**

In ‘Towards a theory of communicative competence’ Habermas provides a critique of Chomsky’s account of linguistic competence. For Chomsky, becoming linguistically competent is to master an abstract system of rules, a system that emerges from an innate language apparatus. Habermas questions three assumptions that are intrinsic to Chomsky’s account, namely “monologism”, “a priorism” and “elementarism”. Before delving into these areas it will be helpful to consider some general points about

Chomsky's position. Though language consists of a finite number of elements, "everyone who masters a language can, with the aid of these elements, understand and produce an infinite number of sentences, some of them unpredictably new" (Habermas, 1970, p. 360). By the same token, competent speakers know when a sentence has been correctly formed because they can "choose intuitively between correct and deviating formulations (ibid, p. 361). That the speaker can do these things goes beyond what she can have picked up from her linguistic environment, a situation that is particularly conspicuous in infants. Consequently, Chomsky assumes that the system of linguistic rules must be an innate apparatus that consists of "universals which predetermine the form of all potential natural languages". This leads on to the assumption that linguistic sequences must be surface manifestations of deep innate structures.

To be linguistically competent therefore involves the mastery of abstract rules irrespective of how they are used in actual speech. For Habermas this is indicative of the "monologism" mentioned above. Competence is founded in the human organism. Intersubjectivity of meaning, the fact that we can have a mutual understanding of the same thing is because you and I are programmed in the same way. Communication would otherwise be impossible. Therefore, the only way of explaining speech is to see it as the result of an "interaction between linguistic competence and certain psychological, as well as sociological, peripheral conditions which restrict the application of the competence" (p.361). As a consequence we get a merging of the notion that innate rules determine both whether expressions are correct/deviant and that a particular expression will be acceptable in a particular situation. If you like semantic and pragmatic aspects both derive from monological innate states of individual speakers, or to put it another way, the pragmatic dimension of language (as understood as a social non-innate process) is elided. To make this claim is dependent on other assumptions. It is important to identify (1) a series of rules allowing for the projection of lexical units into deep grammatical structures, (2) the number of lexical units must be reduced to a finite number of meaning components that the solitary speaker can construct semantic components from. This segues into the elementaristic research strategy through which, with the aid of general semantic markers, lexical units (indeed any lexical units) can be reduced to some few universals. At the same time language supposedly possesses an a priori meaning-structure: the condition that makes meaning possible precedes experience.



In contrast to this vision of language competence, Habermas argues that universal meanings do not precede “all” experience and are not “necessarily rooted in the cognitive equipment of the human” prior to experience or “all socialization” (ibid, p. 363). Here Habermas is not making a complete departure from Chomskyan linguistics (note the qualifier “all” that precedes “experience” and “socialization” in the previous sentences). Habermas distinguishes between meanings that are a priori universal and a posteriori universal. Meanings that are a posteriori universal represent “invariant features of contingent scopes of experience which, however, are common to all cultures.” Moreover some meanings are “intersubjectively universal” developing at the level of culture through communication. Examples include the system of kinship words. So how does Habermas hit on the idea that kinship words are examples of a posteriori cultural universals? Here Habermas turns to anthropology. Though kinship relations and the kinship vocabulary are in one sense common to all cultures, this semantic field “is differently classified depending on the age-, sex- and descent linked primary roles” (p. 364). Consequently, to think of kinship vocabulary as being rooted in the monological capacities of the individual person misses the complexity of what actually goes on in different cultures through the determination of social roles. Chomsky, Fodor and Katz amongst others reduce this complexity to a set of simple semantic markers that develop as binary oppositions such as male versus female, adults and children (p. 365). Conceptual hierarchies impose themselves on these binaries—male over female etc. Habermas argues that for Chomsky *et al.* these hierarchies derive from independent irreducible meaning components, “elements if you like”.

If we follow Habermas’s earlier point out cultural difference, this elementaristic approach to language breaks down:

The conceptual hierarchies which the semantic analysis of a given common vocabulary discloses change in accordance with the world view, i.e. the global interpretation of nature and society, which is valid in a social system at a particular stage of development. It is apparent that the examples presented by Chomsky and his colleagues are likewise guided by a global pre-understanding, though admittedly one that possesses a certain plausibility for us as sharers of the ontology

governing the everyday understanding of enlightened members of our civilization after three hundred years of modern science and the criticism of religion, a hundred years since Darwin, and fifty years since Freud, i.e. after a subjectivization and privatisation of belief systems. (p. 366)

There are several things we can glean from this, namely (1) that language cannot be abstracted from a world view, which must to “some degree” be local and historically contingent; (2) that Chomsky *et al.* are in the grip of a particular kind of Enlightenment thought that exerts a powerful (though plausible and not entirely bad) force that subjectivises and privatises thought. In other words what Habermas is describing is what he later calls the “wrong” turn in Enlightenment thought that gives itself over to subject-centred reason. Habermas does not want to give up on Enlightenment thought but show how it must be reconfigured along communicative lines—the development of reason is not coterminous with the unfolding of the subject as Chomsky would seem to have it. This is a project that Habermas refines throughout his career (the article discussed above represents an early manifestation of this thought). For some readers an alarm may sound at Habermas’s reference to a social system at “a particular stage of development”. This perhaps implies a colonialist (Enlightenment?) mentality, which we shall return to later.

Anyway, so far we have only considered the relationship of kinship words and their ties to a world view, but what about the mechanics of language itself? In a sense Habermas’s discussion of kinship already points in this direction. The hierarchical differences in kinship terms must recognise differing degrees of force that arise out of everyday communication. Language is about more than the transfer of information. The speaker must “have at his disposal, in addition to his linguistic competence, basic qualifications of speech and symbolic interaction (role-behaviour), which we may call *communicative competence*” (p. 367). This communicative competence means “the mastery of the ideal speech situation”. (ibid.) It is at this point that Habermas introduces Austin:

We can elucidate this, in the first instance, by studying the example of a category of verbs to which J.L. Austin ascribed a performatory use. As is well known, verbs like ‘promise’, ‘announce’, ‘warn’, ‘report’, ‘desire’, ‘determine’, etc. can be used to *perform* the acts they respectively designate rather than refer to or describe them. The meaning of a ‘performative utterance’ includes a reference to (a) an *act* of utterance in a particular and appropriate interaction relationship (‘I hereby promise...’), (b) the definition of a (suitable) situation which is explicitly determined by the performance of a speech act itself, and (c) the propositional content of the dependent clause. Austin differentiates between the levels of ‘saying something’ and of ‘doing something’ (locutionary level v. illocutionary level). Being composed of speech acts and dependent clauses of propositional content, utterances in general have, in addition to the meaning of their propositional content, a meaning which is linked to the speech situation as such. This following Austin, we can call their ‘illocutionary force’. When they use performative expressions, the speech acts are representations of that illocutionary force, i.e. the universal pragmatic power of utterances. Expressions of this kind retain no given pragmatic feature of contingent speech situations; they explain the meaning of certain idealised features of speech situations in general, which the speaker must master if his competence is to be adequate for participating at all in situations of potential speech. A theory of communicative competence can thus be developed in terms of universal pragmatics. (p. 367)

In certain respects, Habermas’s reading of Austin here seems close to what I presented in Chapter 2. Habermas’s invocation of performative utterances to challenge the monologicistic theories put forward by Chomsky echoes Austin’s attempt to undermine the descriptive theory of language. We cannot map sentence components onto the world and neither can we map linguistic competence onto some innate subjective “competence”. This is because we are dealing with more than propositional content, but also “appropriateness” regarding a relationship between people and a “suitable” situation. Notably, suitability and appropriateness and suitability may be subject to conditions that differ between cultures. Nevertheless, to go into these differences is not

Habermas's concern. The fact that there are differences will be in accordance with a pragmatics that provides an underlying structure that manifests itself in specific speech situations that give them their particular force. We are dealing with "idealised features" here.

There are one or two issues with Habermas's account (problems that will resurface later) concerning the reading of Austin presented here. Habermas's Kantianism is clearly on display. The utterance, so it seems can be located in accordance with differentiated concerns pertaining to appropriateness suitability and truth. This division is not so clearly established in Austin. It could conceivably be argued that the division of the utterance into its locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions bears some resemblance to Habermas's set of differences, though arguably suitability and appropriateness are both illocutionary concerns. However, in Austin, the divisions that Habermas seizes on are the result of an inability to separate constatives from performatives. Moreover, Habermas's interest in "promising" is also a little odd given that the promise is a particularly unusual type of speech act. If I say "I promise" or "I promise..." I have always done something regardless of concerns pertaining to suitability or appropriateness. The pragmatics of promising are far from universal.

Anyway, we shall leave this concern alone for a while—for the moment it is enough to add it to the game (let it fester?)—and turn to a later essay that seeks to find universal features of speech in action. "What is Universal Pragmatics" would have been available to Lyotard prior to the publication of *The Postmodern Condition* and possibly provides the material for Lyotard's dismissive reading. Here Habermas develops the argument presented above. Note that in "What is Universal Pragmatics", Habermas is largely interested in developing a social theory of speech in action and "ethical concerns" emerge from the outset. Of course the references to "suitability" and "appropriateness" already make a move in this direction

**Universal Pragmatics (A section duller than the last but, I hope, equally thorough)**

"What is Universal Pragmatics" begins like this:

The task of universal pragmatics is to identify and reconstruct universal conditions of possible understanding [*Verständigung*]. In other contexts one also speaks of “general presuppositions of communication,” but I prefer to speak of general presuppositions of communicative action because I take the kind of action aimed at reaching understanding to be fundamental. Thus I start from the assumption (without undertaking to demonstrate it here) that other forms of social action—for example, conflict, competition, strategic action in general—are derivatives of action oriented to reaching understanding [*verständigungsorientiert*]. (Habermas, 2005, p. 118)

The phrasing here is interesting as the implication would seem to be that there is a great likelihood that understanding does or will not occur. If we take it for granted that it does occur, then there would presumably be no need to identify or reconstruct the conditions for its occurrence. Is Habermas offering us a vision of scepticism here? Perhaps the answer is both a “yes” and a “no”. It is not the case that Habermas is casting doubt on whether any old kind of understanding between people can take place, but whether that understanding emerges out of “communicative” action in contrast to the other kinds of action he mentions, namely “conflict, competition and strategic action”. Not only might we assume (though Habermas does not “exactly” say this) that these other forms of action are in some ways ethically inferior, but that we might somehow mistake them for the “real thing” (communicative action) that, in a parasitic way, they rely on.

To reconstruct the conditions for communicative action we must consider the normative conditions that we must already have accepted. Anybody who acts communicatively must “raise universal validity-claims and suppose that they can be vindicated” (p. 119). Therefore such a speaker will claim to be:

1. uttering something understandably
2. giving [the hearer] something to understand
3. making himself thereby understandable; and
4. coming to an understanding with another person. (ibid.)

So the speaker must (1) say something comprehensible, (2) aim to be saying something true, (3) be “truthful”, so that the listener can trust him<sup>3</sup> and (4) pick an utterance that is “right” in regards to a recognised normative background. Coming to an understanding is synonymous with “bringing about an agreement” that involves recognition of the “validity-claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness and rightness” (ibid.). For Habermas full agreement that embraces all four components is not a normal state of linguistic communication. Rather we must think in terms of “bringing about an agreement” (p. 120). This is because typically communication occupies gray areas incorporating “intentional and involuntary untruthfulness and concealed and open discord”. Habermas argues that ordinarily we start from a background consensus as regards what the participants in the conversation take for granted. Once this consensus is unsettled then participants try to find a new definition of the situation that all can share. To behave in this way is to act communicatively. However, if no new definition can be found then communication cannot be continued and the only alternatives are “strategic action” and “discourse”.

Habermas does not devote much space to explaining what strategic action involves. Indeed, he only discusses it in an endnote as the negation of communicative action: “in communicative action a basis of mutually recognised validity-claims is presupposed: this is not the case in strategic action. In the communicative attitude it is possible to reach a direct understanding oriented to validity-claims; in the strategic attitude, by contrast, only an indirect understanding via determinate indicators is possible” (p. 130). I take this to mean, though Habermas does not say as much, that one may reach an indirect understanding by reading through the speaker’s strategy to see how their claims have been determined. The true nature of their claims will be in some ways concealed. If we resort to “discourse” this is because the normative rules are an object of concern. Engaging in “discourse” is to work at a meta-pragmatic level.

Habermas distinguishes between formal analysis which he opposes to empirical analytic procedures. Formal analysis does not denote logical analysis but rather “the

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<sup>3</sup> Habermas regularly distinguishes between speaking the truth in regards to propositional content and being “truthful” in the sense of being sincere. Here we can detect the influence of Austin’s felicity conditions. A successful utterance will not just be true or false, but “happy or unhappy”.

methodological attitude we adopt in the rational reconstruction of concepts, criteria, rules and schemata". The distinction between analytic and reconstructive sciences can be partly explained by the differences between "observation" and "communicative experience/understanding. Whereas observation takes perceptible things as its object, understanding is directed to the meaning of utterances" (p. 122). Though she will in some sense be working within the systematic horizons which organise experience, the "observer" principally works alone. In contrast the "interpreter who "understands" meaning must, for Habermas be fundamentally a participant in communication due to the "symbolically established intersubjective relationship with other individuals (ibid.). This is the case even when she is alone with a book, a work of art etc. Consequently, whereas an observer participates in an immediate relationship to reality, communicative experience is mediated with regard to reality.

Habermas considers the different types of sentence designating the different relationships between observer and reality and interpreter and symbolically prestructured reality. He then considers the different kinds of "interpretation" that observation and interpretation imply. We also have a distinction between observation and understanding, description and explication. I "report" an observation whereas I "describe an observed aspect of reality". Sentences that render interpretations interpret the meanings of a symbolic formation". I can only explicate the meaning of such an utterance.

In regards to description, if we need an explanation of what we describe then this will be a causal explanation—we consider how the thing we are observing comes to pass. However, if the description is incomprehensible, we need an explication of what is meant by the utterance and how the symbolic expression which must be elaborated on or "reframed" came to pass. If the description is not incomprehensible then causal explanation will do the trick. If it does not do the trick then explication is required. Habermas argues that description and explication have different ranges, and both "push through" to underlying structures. Habermas maintains that what he is describing is familiar when considering individual phenomena within say the natural sciences (p. 123). Explication, however, takes a more central role when it is directed at knowledge of "the deep structures of the reality accessible to understanding"—the reality of

symbolic formations produced according to rules”. We cannot look at the meaning of expressions in the same way that we look at nature.

Habermas identifies two levels of explication as regards the meaning of expressions. Firstly, if the meaning of a written sentence, gesture, theory etc. is unclear we look to the semantic content of the symbolic formation. Here, according to Habermas we try to put ourselves in the position of the author who wrote the sentence or performed the gesture (Habermas notes that we may also have to consider contextual factors that the author may be unaware of). Understanding of content for Habermas links surface structures of an incomprehensible formation with surface structures of other familiar formations. By this, he means that linguistic expressions can be paraphrased in one language or translated into another. We are told that competent speakers draw on intuitively known meaning relations obtaining within the lexicon of one language or between two languages. If we cannot reach an understanding at the level of content, we must move to the generative structures of the expression themselves—the rules that brought it forth. So, in the case of normal paraphrase, we make intuitive semantic links (the role of interpreter could potentially apply to the author herself). However, a new attitude makes itself known when the interpreter does not merely wish to apply intuitive knowledge but also wants to “reconstruct” it.

Reconstructing intuitive knowledge involves the interpreter peering through the surface of the symbolic structure to discover the rules according to which it was produced. Therefore, the object of understanding ceases to be the content of the symbolic expression—what the author meant (or the kinds of meaning that the author could not be aware of) but rather the intuitive rule consciousness that a competent speaker has of his own language. This consciousness relates to an illocutionary bond (enter Austin). When we perform an illocutionary act (and the assumption is that this is what we do every time we speak) then we enter into a bond whereby there is a guarantee that certain conditions will be met. So if an assertion shows itself to be incorrect, we’ll drop it when it proves false. By the same token, we can regard a question as settled when a satisfactory answer is given.

Habermas then goes on to ask if illocutionary force has more than just a suggestive influence and considers what it is that motivates the hearer to act in accordance with



the belief that the speaker seriously means what she says. Here Habermas distinguishes between institutionally bound and unbound speech acts. In the case of institutionally bound speech acts, this matter is ultimately decided for us. I take it that Habermas is thinking here of the kinds of example offered by Austin (not that Austin uses the expression “institutionally bound speech acts”). So for example, if I follow the correct procedures for christening a ship, if I say “I christen this ship the Mr Stalin” (one of Austin’s lovely examples) then the conditions under which this is successful or unsuccessful are institutionally bound. If I’ve successfully christened the ship then of course the fact that I’ve christened it will be true. The normative rightness of the expression “I christen this ship the ...” is a convention. Also, the notion of sincerity, whether or not I have appropriate “feelings” does not even enter the picture—as long as I keep to the rules then my act will be successful. Unsurprisingly, Habermas is not really interested in institutionally bound speech acts (although the extent to which he is interested in ordinary utterances or speech acts is one we shall consider later). At this point suffice it to say that institutionally unbound speech acts are Habermas’s concern. Here is Habermas: “The illocutionary force with which the speaker is carrying out his speech act, influences the hearer, can be understood only if we take into consideration sequences of speech actions that are connected with one another on the basis of a reciprocal understanding of validity claims” (p. 125).

The recognition of validity claims is not irrational as cognitive claims can be checked. Therefore reciprocal bonds have a rational basis. It is only therefore possible to influence speakers in an illocutionary way on the basis of validity claims. At this point it is worth noting that Habermas’s primary interest is not in the meaning of utterances (and the ways they might be true or false) but the rules underlying those utterances that allows one to question whether what is said is true or false, appropriate or inappropriate, sincere or in some ways deceptive. Therefore, assertions, descriptions, classifications, estimates, predictions and objections might have specific meanings, but truth, rightness and appropriateness depend on a wider sphere of possibility that follow on from individual utterances. By the same token “requests, orders, admonitions, promises, agreements, excuses and admonitions” all have different meanings, but the claim put forward in the interpersonal relationship refers to the “rightness” of norms and whether or not the speaker is able to assume responsibility for her utterance. In this sense, the content of the speaker’s engagement is determined by the different ways of

appealing to the same thematically stressed universal validity claim. Taking all this into account, for Habermas, the social bond arises out of our “speech act typical commitments” (whether or not we can provide grounds for our claims, to what extent we adhere to norms or whether or not we prove trustworthy).

## **Tensions in the theory of Universal Pragmatics**

Having provided what is largely a descriptive account of Habermas’s theory of universal pragmatics let me set out schematically the fundamental tensions (what is not wholly “comprehensible”):

1. A universal pragmatics as such is a very general sort of business in which ever utterance we make in communication contains a claim to truth, normative rightness, appropriate feeling or:
2. All validity claims are raised in any utterance although only certain ones are emphasised or:
3. Different kinds of utterance are respectively subject to happiness/appropriateness (in Austin’s terms, rightness or appropriateness in Habermas’s/Kant’s terms) or truth, or various combinations, but not necessarily all combinations.

It would seem then that 1 is clearly problematic because, for example, institutionally bound speech acts do not appear to correspond to all the pragmatic dimensions that Habermas mentions. Perhaps a (very Austinian?) point is being made here about the “strategic” politically compromised nature of institutionally bound speech acts. Nevertheless, such acts do not seem to fit the model of a universal pragmatics. More than this, during his essay, Habermas seems to present the difference between the objectifying attitude of the natural scientist and the communicative approach (of the social scientist?) as two equally legitimate paths to follow. The objectifying attitude only takes on board cognitive pragmatic concerns, so it is surely in some way communicatively limited. To confuse matters, on the penultimate page of the essay, Habermas writes: “We can replace this performative attitude (toward society) with an objectifying attitude toward society: conversely, we can switch to a performative

attitude in domains in which (today) we normally behave objectivately—for example in relations to animals and plants). Are we in Husserlian territory here, whereby scientists or social scientists simply look at objects under different aspects? This is, in a sense what Habermas seems to be arguing for, although he clearly believes that it is possible to look at any utterance in accordance with all three pragmatic concerns.

Ultimately, then point 2 listed above, which is really only a slight variation on 1 would seem to reflect Habermas's position. This does not get round the problems with 1 regarding institutionally bound speech acts, although one might say that the criteria of truth and appropriateness also apply but are not emphasised. So, for example, I might have feelings about christening the ship (although it is unclear what appropriate feelings might be here) and of the course the ship will either be truly christened or it won't. To invoke these criteria is strange, but possible. We might, however, think back to the example of promising mentioned earlier and take this as cause for concern. Habermas is not arguing for point 3, though point 3 might, as we shall see, be more easily defensible.

## Strategy and Tone

Earlier, I suggested that Lyotard's use of the term "performativity" represents more than just a rather vulgar transposition of Austin's treatment of performativity into a discussion about the state of knowledge. Rather, it is part of an "attack" on Habermas. I do not use the word "attack" here lightly—"critique" would be too soft. Indeed, to provide a critique of Habermas would imply some carefully worked out argument that looked for inconsistencies, aporias and the like (the kind of thing that I've attempted above). When we think of what a "critique" is, then we might imagine whosoever should undertake such a thing would apply scholarly close attention to the text under critique. Perhaps we might say, following Austin, that there are a number of "happiness" conditions pertaining to what a critique involves and that Lyotard's "treatment" of Habermas is decidedly unhappy. Here is Blake:

Lyotard's sketchy comments on Habermas are not just inadequate but misleading and embarrassingly so. It is a scholarly question of some

interest in its own right as to why a thinker who has much the same political and moral motives should nonetheless treat a distinguished colleague so unsympathetically. (Blake, 2000, p. 59)

There is no “reason” to disagree with Blake here in regards to the “sketchiness” of Lyotard’s comments (we’ll come to these shortly), though whether they are carefully worked out is another matter. As mentioned earlier, Habermas’s project sets out to redeem the Enlightenment from the darkness of instrumental reason and would, superficially at least seem to have “much the same political and moral motives” as Lyotard. That this is only superficially the case is, I think, significant—there is a discord in this respect too. Without wanting to be too hasty I shall float the idea that there are good “pragmatic” reasons for Lyotard to mount an attack rather than proffer a critique. But we are getting ahead of ourselves, so I shall leave that idea to bob up and down for a bit before returning to it. It is perhaps the moment to give an account of Lyotard’s position regarding how one could respond to performativity.

As mentioned earlier, *The Postmodern Condition* deals with the state and status of knowledge in the university. The grand narratives or “bond” that legitimated the university has been broken. Previously everybody could rely on one Grand Narrative or another to legitimate what universities were doing, but this is no longer the case: “Once the unifying thread of Grand Narrative is snapped, the narrative is dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Therefore where we once had an apparently coherent set of rules governing how universities legitimated themselves, this has been dissolved into “clouds” of smaller narratives. The “clouds” metaphor is interesting. Elsewhere, Lyotard talks of “islands of language” (Lyotard, 1993, p. 20). There is of course something rather solid about an island—clouds can merge into one another. Anyway, we are drifting from the point. Coterminous with the break up of narratives is the emergence of another rootless organising principle—performativity. Knowledge can be legitimated in terms of power and effectiveness. However, performativity, though it appears to have colonised the sky is as rootless as any of the small narratives. Consequently, to slip (however briefly) out of its grip, we must divert our attention to small micro-narratives: “Conveyed within each cloud are pragmatic valencies [potentials for creating social bonds] specific to its kind...There are many different language games—a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to

institutions in patches” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). Moreover, “The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread” (p. 40).

To avoid the mistake of thinking that it is woven with a single thread, we must consider the pragmatics of each cloud of particles. But how should we think the pragmatics of each cloud or cluster? Might they correspond to Habermas’s universal claims? Therefore, could each utterance made within each cloud be validated in accordance with truth, rightness and truthfulness? Indeed, at one point during *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard makes explicit reference to differentiated pragmatic concerns following Kant (the same point of influence that Habermas draws on):

Take for example, a closed door. Between “The door is closed” and “Open the door” there is no relation of consequence as defined in propositional logic. The two statements belong to two autonomous sets of rules defining different kinds of relevance, and therefore, of competence. Here, the effect of dividing reason into cognitive and theoretical reason on the one hand, and practical reason on the other, is to attack the legitimacy of the discourse of science. Not directly, but indirectly, by revealing that it is a language game with its own rules (of which the a priori conditions of knowledge in Kant provide a first glimpse) and that it has no special calling to supervise the game of praxis (nor the game of aesthetics for that matter). The game of science is thus put on a par with others. (p. 40)

What, if anything, distinguishes Lyotard’s account here from Habermas’s? We have already seen how Habermas shows that science, when it adopts a purely cognitive approach can ignore other pragmatic concerns (though Habermas is not openly critical of this). Perhaps the main difference is that Lyotard’s Kant thinks in terms of “islands”—where pragmatic concerns are autonomous and each concern does not necessarily always apply. Can the utterances of scientists be validated in terms of truth, rightness and truthfulness? Now, the idea of truthfulness seems somewhat strange here as it is hard to imagine how this would become an issue; I suppose scientists might falsify evidence in the pursuit of fame, this sort of thing, but such cases will be extremely rare (out of the ordinary). Anyway, regardless of whether or not any covert

tinkering is taking place in laboratories, one can always allude to it as a pragmatic condition, see it as part of the picture, but there is something very artificial about this. Habermas's criteria may "apply" but they do not all "come into play". Here we perhaps fall somewhere in between Lyotard's strict divisions and Habermas's universal pragmatics. I am not, at this point, denying that there might be a thread linking different pragmatic dimensions within the same utterance, but that thread is starting to wear a little thin.

With all this in mind, it is worth re-emphasising that Lyotard's main bugbear with Habermas is what he takes to be the latter's fixation with "consensus". Lyotard treats consensus as a moral issue bound up with "choice". Seeking consensus is what Lyotard thinks communicative action is all about whereby "rules" for this consensus are static. He attributes this position to Habermas: That humanity as a collective (universal) subject seeks its common emancipation through the regularization of the 'moves' permitted in all language games". Blake finds Lyotard's treatment of Habermas here rather scandalous as it "puts Habermas in a paradoxically totalitarian light for a radical liberal, proposing an emancipation which looks like no emancipation at all." (Blake, 2000, p. 61)

Though it is true that, for Habermas, to act communicatively is to be understood to tell the truth etc., he recognises that this is not exactly the normal state of things. Often times we are not understood or our truth claims cannot be validated. Moreover, when consensus is not achieved we resort to discourse—the localised pragmatic level becomes a concern. The rules against which we judge truth etc. become a concern. Nonetheless, there is more than a strong suggestion in Habermas that consensus is the state of affairs we strive toward. "Discourse is something we resort to when things do not work out. For Lyotard, here lies the danger. If we are to resist performativity it is not enough to simply query the rules when a resolution is not forthcoming. The response must be a more "active" form of action than Habermas allows for: "Traditional" theory is always in danger of being incorporated into the programming of the social whole as a simple tool for the optimization of its performance; this is because its desire for a unitary and totalizing truth lends itself to the totalizing and unitary system of the system's managers" (Lyotard, p. 12).

Does Habermas propose a “unitary and totalising truth”? Not exactly. As we have seen when looking at Habermas’s discussion of content (in “What is Universal Pragmatics”), Habermas is not really interested in semantics. It is perfectly reasonable to suppose that Habermas would be willing to accede that his Universal Pragmatics was “only that”. He does not appear to be proposing some kind of universal metadiscourse. Nevertheless, a universal pragmatics however loosely applied, is a kind of metadiscourse—the same validity criteria always partake in the scene when people act communicatively. Though a totalising truth may not be of the metaphysical variety, it can still be arrived at communicatively and is thus open to colonisation by performativity.

This is why Lyotard petitions for an “agonistics” to trump Habermas’s consensus which will, if you like, work against the spirit of performativity that itself relies on consensus. Here: “to speak is to fight” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 10). Strategic pragmatic dissonance at a local level might fend off the overwhelming consensual force of performativity.

Bearing all this in mind we can, perhaps, see that Lyotard’s distrust of consensus goes too far. If there are different types of language game, then surely there can be different types of consensus. The sort of consensus on effectiveness offered up by performativity might be a completely different sort of consensus to the model put forward by Habermas. After all, Habermas is after (or at least recognises the pragmatic possibilities) of saying something “true” that can then be validated through interaction. He does not intend this process to be efficient or “effective”. Therefore, what is at stake is whether or not Habermas’s project (or at least the set of conditions he emphasises) is open to the colonising forces of performativity or is somehow resistant to them. After all, the theory of communicative action is meant to resist the dissociating forces that accompany political rhetoric, managerialism, advertising etc. To think like this, however, assumes a level of autonomy of the individual (or in Habermas’s case “individuals”) that Lyotard does not find credible:

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at

“nodal points” of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 15)

The sort of autonomy that would allow for Habermas’s “authentic” communication is illusory. For Lyotard the only hope (and this is a slim tainted hope) lies with the individual: “No one, not even the least powerful among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him as sender”. The most we can do is make an “unexpected move, with its correlative displacement of a partner or group of partners”. Nevertheless, this can still: “supply the system with that increased performativity it forever demands and consumes” (ibid.).

One has to play or fight to keep things moving. This can perhaps explain Lyotard’s hostility toward Habermas—it is a “performance” of some kind. If we take Lyotard’s attack in this way, we might note that he is not going to be the professional philosopher and play by the rules. To some degree this is negative (the great despisers are the great reverers?)—Lyotard is “not” going to offer carefully formulated arguments with careful referencing. We might therefore see Lyotard’s approach as “strategic” but not in the sense that Habermas uses that word—the connotation is not negative although on some level it implies negation. Though what Lyotard has to say about Habermas can be evaluated in Habermasian terms (as Blake does), doing this will miss the point. If you like, Lyotard and Habermas are not playing the same language game. Though Lyotard’s treatment of Habermas represents an “attack” it is not the same sort of attack that analytic philosophers launch on one another. Within the world of analytic philosophy, people partake in debates that different sides can supposedly win or lose? Of course, here the precision of argument is everything. Lyotard is not adopting “that” sort of attitude. Rather, it seems that he wants to draw attention to the presuppositions of philosophy and consider what it means to “do” philosophy differently: “It remains to be said that the author of this report is a philosopher, not an expert. The latter knows what he knows and what he does not know: the former does not.” (p. xxv)

Though negation plays a part in Lyotard’s “game”, this is not the whole story for one does not simply play in order to win:



A move can be made for the sheer pleasure of its invention: what else is involved in that labor of language harassment undertaken by popular speech and by literature? Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings, the process behind the evolution of language on the level of parole. But at least this pleasure depends on a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary—at least one adversary, and a formidable one—the accepted language, or connotation. (p. 10)

This delight in language is affirmative. It echoes the Nietzschean desire mentioned earlier to overcome nihilism (thought of as simple negation). Lyotard reminds us that: “Reactional countermoves are no more than programmed effects in the opponent’s strategy”. One has to be elusive and difficult, play a game that can be enjoyed if not won. This leads us to consider why, if Lyotard is playing such a “serious” game, he does not declare his hand more openly. Why not be more transparent and avoid the bluster? Is Lyotard simply laughing at his audience, “smirking” perhaps? Maybe the simple explanation is that he is trying not to get “caught”.

### **A softer approach**

Lyotard gives a number of examples of agonistic game playing within the scientific community. He dedicates a whole chapter to the various ways in which various individuals have rewritten the rules of science. Indeed this takes us to what might seem a less negative understanding of Lyotard’s “tribute” to Austin when coining the term “performativity”:

Lyotard here ingeniously “saves” the coherence of scientific research and experiment by recasting its now seemingly non- or postreferential “epistemology” in terms of linguistics, and in particular of theories of the performative (J.L. Austin), for which the justification of scientific work is not to produce an adequate model or replication of some outside reality, but rather simply to produce more work, to generate new and fresh scientific enonces) or statements, to make you have

“new ideas” (P.B. Medawar), or best of all (and returning to the more familiar aesthetics of high modernism), again and again to “make it new”: “Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!” (Jameson, 1984, p. ix)

Though Jameson has little in the way of textual evidence to back up this claim, one can perhaps link Lyotard’s understanding of science to the early part of *How to do things with Words* and the failure to separate the constative from the performative. If the constative is always performative it can always be rewritten. This idea is ingenious, and would seem to be the only hope for science. However, at the same time, Lyotard has interesting things to say about speech acts of another sort. Let us consider a story that Lyotard tells of the Cashinahua tribe and indeed the stories that they tell do not arise out of “the choice called the occident”. (p. 8):

A Cashinahua story-teller always begins his narration with a fixed formula: “Here is the story of-, as I’ve always heard it told. I will tell it to you in my turn. Listen.” And he brings it to a close with...: “Here ends the story of -. The man who has told it to you is- [Cashinahua name], or to the Whites- [Spanish or Portuguese name].” (p. 20)

Now we might note that there are clear pragmatic rules here regarding “who” can tell the story (a male Cashinahua), those who are allowed to hear it (a male Cashinahua, a bearer of a Cashinahua name and a pre-puberty Cashinahua girl). There is also a rule about who is permitted to be the theme of the story (all the Cashinahuas). We might “innocently” note that in this story (and as Habermas tells us in ‘What is Universal Pragmatics’, stories contain speech acts) that “the form of narrative, the truth, the truthfulness and the rightness (in Habermas’s terms) of the story are not a problem” (Steuermaier, 1992, p. 109). Rather the story’s “legitimacy” comes from being retold. There is “an immemorial beating”, that generates a different sense of time from modern time—phenomenologically we are in another place.

Let us stick with stories for a minute. What about stories that analytic philosophers tell? Such stories are generally employed to make a point—the story services a point. Normally it will be the case that Habermas’s criteria do apply. Not only should the

story be understandable but one will see a truth in it (or not), recognise its rightness (or not), though one would probably question the way in which it was “felt”. Clearly, philosophers who tend to tell these stories are not trying to deceive anybody though were we to see the story as expressive (in the way stories ordinarily are) then in pragmatic terms (given that somebody will either be reading or listening to their story), this might seem excessive. But of course there are (and there always are aren’t there?) exceptions to this. Let us take Bernard Williams’ famous story about two people drowning, one of whom is your wife. For Williams, to reason about who should be saved would be to have “one thought too many”. This is of course a marvellously expressive sentence—it sticks with you, makes you laugh! —though perhaps this is a matter of opinion. However, there is something interesting about Williams’ story that we might set against one of Habermas’s more famous allusions to Austin, namely the “performative contradiction”.

Habermas accuses certain writers (those he considers to be counter Enlightenment philosophers) as engaging in a performative contradiction. This is because he believes that they “argue” for the non-existence of reason. If I say: “there is no such thing as reason” or, if we include the illocutionary verb “I argue that there is no such thing as reason” then I am doing the very thing, “reasoning”, that I maintain cannot be done. For performative or illocutionary force to take effect, for you to be convinced, what I have to say must be “verifiable” or “falsifiable”. If I say: “I argue that there is no such thing as reason”, then this is neither verifiable nor falsifiable”. The sentence undermines itself. Habermas uses this example as a means to demonstrate the ongoing pervasiveness of reason against its enemies. However, what is going on with the phrase “he has had one thought too many”? Here Williams uses reason (he is making an argument) that there is no place for reason on this occasion. Nevertheless, what he says makes sense and has force, although it is also not strictly falsifiable or verifiable. One could make the argument that there are perfectly good reasons for saving the other person, but to do this would be to miss the point (and someone might have drowned in the meantime). If we bring in Habermas’s criteria we can see that Williams’ utterance is normatively right, emotionally appropriate, and cognitively problematic—the constative or cognitive dimension is under duress. Perhaps Williams is engaged in a “constative contradiction”, yet we might restate the claim that his words have illocutionary force nonetheless.

In the last few paragraphs, I have drawn attention to what I believe to be an area of Lyotard's thought that is "softer" than his interest in agonistics. The stories of the Cashinahua tribe represent "ordinary" uses of language that show up the limitations of Habermas's schema. As Williams' funny example demonstrates, there are occasions in which certain "considerations" are better left well alone.

## **Phrases, Genres of Discourse and the Sublime**

Lyotard eventually gives up on agonistics and develops a philosophy of language in tune with an original reading of the Kantian sublime. In the subsequent section we shall consider what this amounts to. The reading of Lyotard presented here will be in keeping with Gordon Bearn's and I will not (intentionally) depart from it. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, I find nothing to disagree with in Bearn's reading of Lyotard (I will however attempt to consider one or two issues that Bearn ignores that will seem peculiar to thought that is of a rationalist disposition).

Bearn argues that we must read Lyotard's interest in "the sublime" in accordance with the latter's philosophy of language and his discussion of "phrases", "genres of discourse" and "differends". Let us begin with phrases. Lyotard does not provide a definition of a "phrase" but rather gives examples such as "a fleeting blush; a tapping of the foot; give me a lighter" (p. 233)—it seems that virtually anything can count as a phrase. Phrases are to be thought of as "events"—they are "nothing cognitive or significant at all" (ibid.) and are the only thing that survives universal doubt. What does this mean? When Lyotard speaks of "the phrase" he is thinking of that entity/event prior (in a non-chronological sense) to its being linked and situated within discourse—the phrase/event is simply an "it happens" or an "is it happening" (Lyotard, 1988) which once it is linked is realised as "what happens". Therefore, the phrase is "a presentation before the chronological present" an "event" prior to linking. When phrases are linked they bring the chronological realm into being. This is because linking is bound up with goal directedness—it binds the phrase to a past/present/future, which divides experience and unites it in accordance with the goal of linking. We can

only gain an understanding of the present because linking has constituted it (Bearn, 2000, p. 233).

When a phrase is linked it is done so in accordance with a number of possible phrase regimens such as reasoning, knowing, describing, recounting, questioning, showing and ordering. Different regimens serve to “throw the chain over the abyss of not-being that opens between phrases”, therefore suturing over the “eventness” of a phrase. However, to think solely in terms of regimen gets us nowhere. This is because the functioning of regimen is determined by the genre of discourse in which they are utilised. Genres of discourse guide particular moves. Because several linkages across genres of discourse are possible, once a genre takes hold of a phrase this produces a “differend”—only one kind of linkage can happen at a time. So what is a differend? Well, “as distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict between at least two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments” (Lyotard, 1988, sect. 40). Because we link in one way, we cannot link in another and this produces a differend.

Let us pause for a moment. It seems that there is every reason to query what has just been said. What an earth does Lyotard mean by a phrase that has yet to be linked. Surely such things do not exist. Moreover, if a litigation can be distinguished from a differend (in the sense that a litigation “can” be resolved by a rule of judgement) then how can a differend occur every time we link. We might imagine that in the case of schooling, a litigation might take place when somebody pointed to the injustice of expecting schools to achieve grades which the students are not even predicted to get, despite the fact that though those grades have been “predicted” by centrally approved methods. This would seem to be a litigation in the sense that it does not question statistical accountability *per se*, but the way in which it is being treated. In contrast a differend might occur when launching a critique of statistical accountability in a language that is not acceptable to the system. Though this is right on one level, the fact that a differend will occur every time we link shows how the fullness or presence that might be ascribed to either a litigation that is understandable to the system, or indeed one that is not, will always be compromised. Phrases could always have been linked in other ways. Dislocating the phrase from the chronological present is therefore an imaginative leap that flies in the face of rationalist concerns for an impossible

completeness and consistency “The differend is reborn from the resolutions of supposed litigations” (Lyotard, 1988, sect. 263).

With this in mind genres of discourse (which may be represented by certain kinds of philosophy as well as performativity) cut off other avenues of thought, hold phrases in their grip and impose “the finality of a necessary causality”. This is what leads Lyotard to write:

No matter what its regimen, every phrase is in principle what is at stake between genres of discourse. This differend proceeds from the question, which accompanies any phrase, of how to link onto it. And the question proceeds from the nothingness that separates one phrase from the “following”. There are differends because, or like, there is Ereignis [an event, an occurrence]. But that’s forgotten as much as possible: genres of discourse are modes of forgetting the occurrence; they fill the void between phrases. (p. 235)

Here, Lyotard draws our attention to the fundamental irony that the absent quality of the phrase (its non-chronological “is it happening”) is what allows for genres of discourse to grip it and smooth over the absence.

It seems that Lyotard has led us to an impasse. However, he does not simply give up. Rather he turns to Kantian aesthetics of the sublime. This turn is in keeping with what he sees as the philosophical necessity of bearing witness to differends through finding “idioms” for them. The idiom is a linguistic mode accessible only to those ways of thinking that are “not” bound by genres of discourse—the arts, philosophical thinking and philosophical politics (I think we can safely assume that Lyotard does not mean all art, all philosophical thinking or all philosophical politics). To bear witness to the differend is to bear witness to the “now” before chronology. It can only happen if we question/negate “everything including thought” and accept that something will “happen that reason has not yet known”. That way, we accept the occurrence of what is “not yet” determined. Lyotard describes such philosophical work in terms of “Peregrinations in the desert” (Lyotard, 1991, p. 74).

For Lyotard, the activity of bearing witness to the differend resonates with Kant's treatment of the sublime. The sublime works in accordance with the movement from a no to a yes it is "a pleasure that arises only indirectly: it is produced by a feeling of momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger". For Kant, it seems that our imagination will fail to deal with something at first and then reason can think the infinite as a totality, though the totality could never be presented as such in an intuition. Bearn argues that bearing witness to the differend might be rather like this—first we feel pain at the differend then we try to find idioms to present what escapes presentation. This will involve the negation of desires goals and purposes.

Up till this point the discussion has dealt with some pretty esoteric philosophy. At this point I will bring the discussion round to the relevance to schooling of what has been presented so far. This will necessarily involve a shift in register. What follows may seem tonally incongruous but that incongruity is something I want to thematise. The dissonance in register represents a strategy, or perhaps, more accurately, an attempt to bear witness to a differend.

## **The Grand Narratives of Schooling**

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at how performativity has come to usurp the grand narratives of the Enlightenment. It might be worth considering whether education, or more specifically schooling, has its own grand narratives. The most obvious candidates are arguably the liberal and progressive traditions of educational thought. These are so familiar I will provide brief though hopefully not glib accounts of these traditions.

The notion of what a liberal education entails is nicely captured by the work of what has been called the London School, whose work developed in the 1960s. The most famous advocates of a liberal education are perhaps R.S. Peters and Paul Hirst (see for example Peters (1963) and (1966)). The term liberal here is generally used to denote the liberty or freedom that education can provide if conducted properly. A liberal education is a plea for education, not training. Philosophers who argue for a liberal education believe that education should not be confined to specialism, nor constrained

by established beliefs. Moreover, a liberal education involves developing the ability to think originally and independently. It frees the mind to function according to its nature, frees reasoning from error and frees human conduct from wrong. In a sense, a liberal education is at least as old as Plato. We might think here of the figure in Plato's *Republic* (Plato, 2003) who escapes the confines of the cave to contemplate beautiful forms in the sunlight. Of course, the vision represented by the allegory of the cave is rather different to the modern version. To be set free is to overcome the illusions that are normal for human beings, and to come to see the truth. On the platonic view, coming to see the truth takes precedence over the value of coming to decide things for oneself. In contrast, the modern version of freedom (as understood by advocates of a liberal education) attaches to the formal nature of rationality. Someone who is not rational and well-informed is at the mercy of her passions, liable to be influenced by others and limited by ignorance. In contrast, autonomy involves making well-informed choices. Executive virtues are required so that the autonomous person has the will to see through whatever she decides to do. The focus on autonomy is clearly strongly Kantian in nature. The traditional "disciplines" are important to advocates of a liberal education. They cover what Hirst calls the "forms of knowledge", those distinct ways of reasoning that are part of the human inheritance. Such "forms of knowledge" provide different ways of disciplining the mind. Each of these requires an initiation, in the absence of which certainly possibilities of thought will be closed off to the individual. They allow the mind to function according to its nature, this being understood teleologically. They are a realisation of mind. Hence, they are at the heart of the freedom that education must bring about.

Having considered what a liberal philosophy of education looks like, let us briefly turn to progressivism. A "progressive" (or "child/student-centred") approach to education can be traced at least as far back as the Romantic individualism of Rousseau's *Emile* (Rousseau, 1911), and it is most famously associated with the work of John Dewey (See for example Dewey (1925), (1963) and (1966)). Progressive educators argue that people learn best when interacting with other people. Consequently, a great emphasis is put on co-operation over competition. It is argued that this not only makes learning more effective but also increases creativity and has good social outcomes. Good social outcomes would include the development of the democratic spirit. Traditional education had tended to favour the more able whereas progressive education recognises



the need to develop all children in their own right. Also, progressive educators/thinkers have often argued for the need to consider aims of consciousness-raising for particular groups in the light of circumstances of oppression. They aim to avoid creating fodder for industry and obedient compliant citizens. Progressive educators emphasise the importance of teaching in accordance with developmental stages (a notion that receives much emphasis within the psychology of education), which should govern when particular subject matter is introduced. They also recognise the importance of accounting for personal or temperamental differences between children—education must be adjusted to the individual learner’s needs. When teaching one should also start from the ““social” circumstances of the child. Progressive educators emphasise the importance of learning by doing. The experience of learning should focus not simply on reading and drill, but on the experiences and activities that make up real life. Consequently, they aim to break the hermetic seal that traditionally separates the classroom from the outside world. They wish to temper the “bookish” spirit of traditional education. Progressive thinkers not only sever the cord separating the classroom from the outside world. They also question the distinction between work and leisure. An understanding of childhood as a separate domain informs such questioning. For progressivists, it is important to build on the imaginative, creative aspects of childhood and provide environments and outlets to foster these aspects. This will not only lead to more effective learning, it will lead to flourishing and happiness.

Let us now consider a scene from schooling to gain an impression of what has happened to education’s grand narratives.

### *Scene 1*

*I shall begin at the beginning, certainly as far as the culture of the school is concerned, with the phenomenon of the first day back after the summer break; in many schools this is an INSET day.<sup>1</sup> The first INSET day has everything to do with performance and is a resonant reminder of how our professional subjectivity is generated by it. The first*

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### Notes

1. INSET stands for In Service Training. Schools are required to offer a set number of training days each year. These are usually dedicated to developing skills and improving performance.

*meeting of the year involves the entire teaching staff watching senior management run through the GCSE results et al.<sup>2</sup> This involves a comparison with previous results and results that were predicted by various computer programmes based on comparative statistics. Generally speaking, this will either be followed by congratulation for success at meeting targets, or a telling off, thinly veiled in managerial language, for “failure”. At the micro-level of this process, teachers compare their results with target grades to see if they have achieved value on their results. This will often be formalised in a performance management meeting with the teacher’s line manager.*

During the course of the school year a teacher’s performance will undergo checks involving lesson observations and evaluation of marking skills in exercise books. These evaluations tend to be conducted in relation to departmental requirements. Practice in the classroom is therefore to some degree standardised according to prescribed policies. Relative failure or success as regards results will involve rethinking the policies, although constant innovations will be applied in more energetic departments.

The picture illustrated above clearly demonstrates that what teachers do is largely regulated by, or in relation to, technological systems that determine an expected outcome or result. The methodologies for achieving these results are homogenised as far as is humanly possible and the shape of the year leads to annual regulation of success. The language that shapes and surrounds these procedures is replete with acronyms, technical terminology and the language of business.

There is clearly a metonymic relationship here between Lyotard’s description of performativity and what is happening in schools. The input/output model conforms to Lyotard’s model in the sense that statistics are electronically merged with exam results to produce predicted grades. Those grades become the most overriding system for measurement of performance. Satisfaction is achieved if results conform to the

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2. The acronym GCSE stands for General Certificate of Education. These are the first serious official exams that students take. They are usually taken by sixteen year old students. Schools are judged according to the success of their GCSE results.

information produced by a computer program, and this conformity is more important than the quality of the achievement

Clearly, what is being described here relates to the nihilism diagnosed by Nietzsche mentioned earlier on in this chapter. Schools that succeed only do so because they do not fail and vice versa. The kinds of aim implicit to the liberal and progressive traditions are no longer on view. Thinking about a liberal understanding of education, might we compare the teachers/executives sitting round the computer to the figures that stare at the shadows in Plato's Cave? Have we seen an ancient allegory take a more solid form and become more than metaphor? Looked at in a certain way, the participants in the scene described are very like the cave-dwellers. This is assuming that they do not question the limitations of the form of illumination that has been laid on for them and sit there sleepily contemplating it. Moreover, in the darkness they may compete for "honours"—who can gain the most value on their statistics and be proclaimed the very best of teachers? But what of those who turn away, aided or unaided towards the source of light? There are no beautiful forms to contemplate but a machine-made contraption, a contrivance worthy of the Wizard of Oz. The last remnants of a liberal education are still retained through the teaching of subjects like English literature. Other "traditional" subjects like Geography, History and Modern Languages can be dropped at 14.

Perhaps progressivism has fared a little better. After all, contemporary pedagogy certainly seems to focus on the "manner" rather than the "matter" of education through the focus on transferable skills and the like. However, the progressive focus on how one teaches has been stripped down. "Facilitation" is no longer about making learning pleasurable, about tapping into the experience of childhood or about a genuine concern for developing democracy. Pedagogical "methods" have become instruments of "effectiveness". It might be argued that the focus on the individual learner in today's classrooms reflects progressive ideals. However "learners" are not quite the same thing as "children". If you are synonymous with your target grade", the kind of authenticity that progressivism tried to "bring out" is no longer at issue.

One can perhaps see the kernel of progressivism and the drive toward authenticity in the "Student Voice" movement. The notion of "student voice" has gained particular

popularity in recent years. Indeed, it might appear to offer the promise of progressivism. It is all about involving children in a democratic process of schooling, a process that takes their voices seriously and moves beyond the cursory nods to student involvement that had characterised school councils (where students would have little involvement in tackling anything very important). There is clearly some recognition of the force of performativity within the student voice debate (or should we say children's voice [s]?) which has clearly embraced a form of progressivism. That said, much of the material in the area of student voice is devoted to "raising standards". Those very voices that are so concerned (and we are dealing with a very serious bunch of people here!) do not necessarily recognise the dissonance (in my experience they sometimes favour the ugly "disconnect") between effectiveness culture and the development of the democratic process. Notably there is nothing deceitful about this. The proponents of student voice are in earnest (and oh are they earnest!) about what they are doing. They make arguments that are accepted or refuted within the "student voice" academic community and operate within a systematic normative horizon. Of course the normative horizon here is provided by performativity. Moreover, the students/children who would engage with student voice have been brought up within the culture of performativity, reared to play that language game. They too may earnestly engage in debate, but . . . if one looks for "authenticity" one is likely to be disappointed. As Stephen Ball writes:

[T]he potential for inauthenticity and meaninglessness is increasingly an everyday experience for us all. The activities of the new technical intelligentsia, of management, drive performativity into the day-to-day practices of teachers. They make management, ubiquitous, invisible, inescapable—part of and embedded in everything we do. Increasingly, we choose and judge our actions and they are judged by others on the basis of their contribution to organisational performance, rendered in terms of measurable outputs. Beliefs are no longer important—it is output that counts. (Ball, 2006, p. 151)

This embeddedness that Ball refers to is not always recognised by the academic education community. In my experience the term "performativity" has often been bandied about in meetings. However, on such occasions, I often felt that it was taken to

simply refer to the government focus on results and summative assessment. The reader will probably be unsurprised to learn that I have sat through meetings in which talk of effectiveness, different “knowledges”, “creative partnerships”, “student experts”, etc., have all been “on the table”. Yet, at the same time, the participants who spoke this language so fluently would also be opposed to target culture and “performativity”. I have also witnessed drives to resuscitate progressivism such as the recent Cambridge Primary Review. However, the Review also speaks the cold language of “effectiveness” despite its commitment to broader educational aims. Performativity is not something one can easily opt out of.

It seems fairly clear that authenticity or, to put it another way, freedom from performativity is not an option. There is no unsullied educational island to paddle up to. Is this a reason to give up hope? I do not think so. However, what is required is a more probing and subtle philosophy than the liberal and progressive narratives of the past can provide.

### *Agonistics and Sublime Education*

Having considered what has happened to liberal and progressive ideas, does Lyotard’s philosophy provide anything that might guide our thinking in terms of how to counter performativity? The notion of playing agonistic language games might be a place to start. However, the kinds of activity (drawn from the university) that Lyotard describes—where scientists reinvent the rules that constitute science—sounds a little ambitious as a project for school teachers to undertake. Moreover, even if one could envisage what this would amount to, it would be difficult to disentangle it from the constant “innovations” that plague teachers’ lives and have everything to do with performativity.

One can, I suppose, imagine a micro-politics of the classroom in which teachers resist the pressures to bring their work into line with prescribed teaching models. In a sense this is what I used to try and do in my classroom. For example, I gave very short shrift to the idea of three part lessons, only used ICT when I thought it was appropriate and refused to put learning objectives up on the board. For quite a long time I was left

alone as my results were good (the notion that modern pedagogical “techniques” would invariably boost results is, in my experience, somewhat suspect). However, as managerial forces intensified and descended we were required to “make” students write objectives in their books (so this could be checked by line managers). Children also had to put assessment objectives inside the front covers. Senior managers would go on “curriculum walks” to ensure that ICT was being used and “lively” teaching styles were being adopted. What I am saying is that you can run and hide but eventually they will catch you.

## The Sublime School

What “significance” might Lyotard’s thoughts on the sublime have for schooling? It would seem that in and amongst the activities teachers may engage in to fill their “professional roles”, when they are constrained by learning objectives or illuminating their rooms with PowerPoint presentations, there may be moments of silent contemplation in which something unexpected (possibly frightening) is allowed to emerge. Perhaps teachers might suddenly come to question everything “including thought” and feel that their work has been stifled by the numerous effects of statistical goals. Then the situation is suddenly transformed into a sublime state of absence waiting to find idioms. They will suddenly no longer know what teaching is—previously they had thought it was all about structures, learning objectives and learning styles. That has now been cleared away. Unfortunately, the system (which is inescapable) will eventually bring them back to all this.

It should perhaps be noted that this understanding of the sublime in relation to education derives from Bill Readings’ book *The University in Ruins* (Readings, 1996), and there is something very universityish about it. University lecturers will still have a deep involvement with their subject through research, etc., but this will hardly be the case with schoolteachers. Moreover, the facilitator culture has encouraged the modern teacher to think less about their subject and to concentrate more on “transferable skills”. In my experience newly qualified teachers are quite likely to refuse sixth form teaching (teaching of 16-18 year olds) on the grounds that it represents “academic” challenges that they feel ill-at-ease with. Is an experience of the sublime (however

limited) only (or largely) available to intellectuals? It would seem one has to be a pretty deep thinker to unthink oneself into the possibly impossible sublime space. Indeed, Lyotard's examples of this kind of behaviour are often drawn from the least accessible instances of modern art.

These are serious reservations, and so it is not without reservations that I now turn to consider what must count as something of a sublime moment in Alan Bennett's *The History Boys*. The film's action takes place over a year in the lives of a group of particularly high-achieving students (from an ordinary comprehensive school near Sheffield) as they attempt to sit Oxbridge exams<sup>4</sup>.

Due to the unusually good A-level results, the head teacher (an ambitious, unprincipled, reptilian figure) is particularly determined that the boys gain places at Oxford or Cambridge. However, he feels that they may lack the necessary "edge" to ensure success. Consequently, he employs Irwin, a young Oxbridge graduate, for the specific purpose of sharpening the boys up. Much of the drama focuses on the different approaches to teaching and learning displayed by Irwin, who teaches the students exam technique, Hector who teaches them "general studies"—Hector is unhappy with the term "general studies": "There is no such thing as general studies. General studies is a waste of time. Knowledge is not general, it is specific."—and Dorothy who teaches the students A Level History.

In certain respects the film is a meditation on performativity, which in certain respects is embodied in the character of Irwin. For Irwin, making judgements about history is not the issue—there is no sense of making a good or bad judgement about history, or of taking a stand. Rather, there are multiple ways of reading events, which can only be distinguished on the grounds of how interesting a particular interpretation might be. Irwin's teaching manner is confrontational and frequently mocking in its attempt to wake the students up from the stupor that lulls them into thinking that there might be

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<sup>4</sup> The play/film (the play was made into a film) is set in the early 1980s and there are good reasons for this. Up until the early 1980s A-level students who wanted to get into Oxbridge and Cambridge would spend an extra year at school to prepare for the tests and the interview. This practice was then abolished.

good and bad judgements. The roots of their judgements are aborted as he interrogates students, dismisses their naivety and provides a virtuoso display of all manner of “interesting” readings of history. Ultimately, we find out that Irwin has misrepresented himself at interview and that he is not an Oxford graduate but had attended a teaching college there. He is brimming over with resentment at his own failure, a resentment that permeates his approach to academic enquiry.

One of the more memorable scenes featuring Hector, Irwin and the boys involves a discussion during which the characters consider whether or not it is possible to “teach” the holocaust (both Hector and Irwin are present during this lesson). Some of the students try to impress Irwin by coming up with clever explanations that might justify a discussion of the holocaust: “It has origins, it has consequences. It’s a subject like any other.” In response to this, Hector says: “They go on school trips there nowadays, don’t they? Auschwitz, Dachau. What’s always concerned me is: where do they have their sandwiches, drink their cokes?” Of course, one of the students misunderstands this question and responds: “The visitors’ centre. It’s like anywhere else.” However, Hector continues: “Yeah, but do they take pictures of each other there? Are they smiling? Do they hold hands? Nothing is appropriate.”

Let us think again for a moment of Habermas’s concern that our utterances should be true, normatively right and “felt”. Clearly the criteria for communicative interaction, as Habermas understands it, is lacking in what the boys are up to—they are disconnected from their words. In a sense they may be trying to say something true, but the illocutionary force of their utterances would seem to depend on whether or not Irwin finds their comments sufficiently clever. However, Hector’s response is also far removed from communicative action. What he says does not take the form of an argument. Rather, through images, through a mini-narrative if you like, he gestures towards an unspeakable silence, a blank. Here Hector is not involved in an agonistics (nothing so aggressive, or perhaps scientific is going on). Of course, a differend emerges between Hector’s words and the boys’ argument and indeed, on some views, rational argument *per se*. We might say that what he offers is something like an education in the sublime.



Even though schoolteachers might experience the sublime, is this all we can hope for? To some degree Bearn is supportive of Lyotard's project in that there is no one way to make links "guaranteed by some special semantic object or other". However, as he shows us with reference to Lyotard's discussion of modern art, Lyotard's sublime is unlike Kant's, which involves a "no" followed by a "yes". Rather Lyotard's sublime involves a "no" followed by a "no" (Bearn, 2000, p. 238). This is because the "event" (the yes) must always be "betrayed by putting it into words, colours, a link, a phrase" (ibid.). Bearing witness (if there is a yes element to it) must always fail by producing other differends. We are left with the depressing claim that "To link some emptiness is necessary" (Lyotard quoted in Bearn, 2000, p. 241). At best we are left with a pseudo-religious worship of absence. Bearn's point here would seem to be backed by Lyotard's choice of the phrase "Peregrinations in the desert"—a pilgrimage to nothing.

## **An alternative**

If agonistics and the sublime do not get us very far, then perhaps the softer examples drawn from *The Postmodern Condition* offer more in the way of hope. As we saw with the example of the Cashinahua tribe's stories (and Bernard Williams's drowning wife) there are clearly occasions (many occasions?) when particular pragmatic criteria do not apply, or at least if one tries to make them apply it can be shown that one is in danger of becoming ridiculous. There are simply occasions on which the apparatus of modern pedagogy is just simply inappropriate. Let us consider another scene drawn from schooling to illustrate what might be at stake here.

### *Scene 2*

An English teacher decides that her class will study the film *Dead Poets' Society*. Students will eventually write an essay on the film for their GCSE media coursework assignment. Having made this decision, the teacher generates a scheme of work incorporating learning objectives, assessment criteria, opportunities for kinaesthetic learning and a lot of other things that teachers are expected to include in their planning.

The reason I employ this scene (which is not a fabrication!) here is that its inappropriateness derives from the substance of the film. *Dead Poets' Society*, whatever you think about it, is a celebration of free (though not untempered) expression in education. Indeed, the film includes a famous scene in which the class read from an introduction to a poetry anthology. This introduction includes a method for evaluating the relative merits of sonnets by Byron and Shakespeare using a graph. The class are asked to rip the introduction out of their books, as inappropriate and against the spirit of the poetry. In the same vein, teaching *Dead Poets' Society* whilst rigorously adhering to assessment criteria, learning objectives, etc., is against the spirit of the film. A dreadful chimera rears its head as constituent parts attack one another. That this could go unacknowledged says a great deal about the force of performativity. Nevertheless, here one can provide rational grounds against the rationalisation of education. Would this be another constative contradiction, or are we simply bearing witness to a differend?

## Chapter 3

# Derrida, Iterability and the Arrivant

In the last chapter I gave an account of Lyotard's understanding of "performativity". Though his agonistic response to performativity bears the mark of optimism, as we saw, this gradually faded away. For Lyotard, the only possible hope or "redemption" for postmodern society lies in a blank desert space where something might appear or happen. Equally nothing may appear or happen. Ultimately, Lyotard's philosophy succumbs to an elitist and ascetic refusal to engage. He no longer wanted to come out to play. Consequently, though Lyotard's work is fabulously prescient in regards to the future of knowledge and the university and terribly convincing in its diagnosis of the malaise that education has succumbed to, it ultimately has little to say about how thinking might take a more optimistic line. If Lyotard has anything to say on this matter at all, the scientist's agonistics and academic ascetism have no weight or place in the context of ordinary schooling. That said, the account of "The Sublime" and his recognition of pragmatic dissonance, offer some hope.

In this chapter we turn to the work of Jacques Derrida whose philosophy provides a powerful though limited form of optimism. In a later part of this chapter we will consider Derrida's reading of Austin and the opportunities for thinking through the malaise described above. However, it will hopefully be helpful to provide a brief more general background to Derrida's philosophy of language before delving into this territory.

Derrida wishes to draw attention to the false metaphysics that has held philosophy in its grip. He does this by providing a critique of what he calls logocentrism and phonocentrism. Let us begin by considering what Derrida has to say about the phonocentrism which he believes characterises the history of the philosophy of language, indeed, the history of thinking generally. Here is Derrida:

The system of “hearing (understanding)—oneself-speak” through the phonic substance—which *presents itself* as the nonexterior, nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc. (Derrida, 1997, p. 5)

With an irregular and essentially precarious success, this movement would have apparently tended, as toward its *telos*, to confine writing to a secondary and instrumental function: translator of a full speech that was fully present (present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general), technics in the service of language, *spokesman*, interpreter of an originary speech itself shielded from interpretation. (pp. 7-8)

When we speak we feel a closeness to our words, a command over them, a sense of control. Therefore, the spoken word does not seem isolated from its utterance, unlike the written word, which already seems to render a sense of dislocation. When we speak, our words “seem” to register something internal whereas writing “feels” external, distant and supplementary. Therefore speech appears to be present to thought whereas, in contrast, writing seems to embody absence. When we read a book, the author is not there, we cannot speak to them. Also, the things, which the words refer to, are not in front of us. We might therefore say that writing (conceived of in the traditional sense) connotes absence and therefore otherness in relation to our words. We will come back to this shortly.

Related to the phonocentrism described above is a certain logocentrism. To think logocentrically is to adhere to a belief in truth that is beyond or above history. This vision of truth sees various truths as having the quality of metaphysical presence. Such truth is “internal” and therefore superior to all forms of “exteriority” whether they are cultural, historical or textual. It seems obvious that language originates with speech—we speak before we can write! It therefore appears equally obvious that speech is somehow closer to the *logos*:

As has been more or less implicitly determined, the essence of the *phone* would be immediately proximate to that which within “thought” as *logos* relates to “meaning”, produces it, receives it, speaks it, “composes” it. If, for Aristotle, for example, “spoken words (*ta en te phone*) are the symbols of mental experience (*pathemata tes psyches*) (*De Interpretatione*, 1, 16a 3) it is because the voice, producer of *the first symbols*, has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. (Derrida, 1997, p. 11)

As mentioned earlier, when we speak we get the impression that our speaking reflects an outpouring of our thoughts. Spoken words are therefore “symbols” of our thoughts. This way of thinking creates a hierarchy in which thought (*logos*) comes first, followed by speech and then writing: before history, knowledge and culture, there is presence. Plato’s writing on “the forms” provides a clear example of logocentrism—the very goal of philosophy is the reappropriation of presence that can only take place (in however partial a fashion) if one seeks to commune with the eternal forms. The text as such, is only an aid/supplement to this process.

To show how Derrida provides a critique of phonocentrism and logocentrism, it will be helpful at this point to introduce Saussure and his theory of the linguistic sign. The sign, according to Saussure, is made up of the signifier (an “acoustic image”) and the signified (a concept). Language is a structure made up of signs. For Saussure, the signifier is in an arbitrary relationship with the signified—there is nothing “cowish” about the word “cow”. Language is structured according to differences—“cat” is different from “bat” by one letter, and this difference in the signifier leads to two

completely different signifieds. It should be noted that Saussure's theory is clearly phonocentric:

In every case, the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing. All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself. . . (Derrida, 1997, p. 11)

For Saussure, the signified belongs to/is located in the mind. Because the voice seems more immediately connected to our thoughts, it is closer to the signified. Consequently, the "notion of the sign always implies within itself the distinction between signifier and signified, even if, as Saussure argues, they are distinguished simply as the two faces of one and the same leaf. This notion remains therefore within the heritage of that logocentrism which is also a phonocentrism: absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the ideality of meaning". (p. 12)

Derrida's reading of Saussure is not wholly critical. Let us set this out schematically:

1. Derrida agrees with Saussure that the linguistic sign is arbitrary, but argues that Saussure fails to account for the implications of this. Having seen that there is nothing cowish about the word "cow", Saussure turns away from the more radical possibilities that accompany this recognition and turns toward the logocentric assumption that there is some fullness of meaning that exists behind the sign, which is then embodied in speech.
2. Derrida argues that if we take Saussure's argument to its logical conclusion, then the arbitrariness demonstrated by the latter (the signifier?) demonstrates a dislocation, a fundamental otherness that characterises the relationship between the *mark* of the signifier and the *content* of the signified—in this sense the signified is, in an original sense, absent from the mark.

3. To go one stage further, if we can only think in words, and yet our words as referents bear no necessary relationship to their meaning, then the logocentric hierarchy (thoughts—speech spoken words—writing as supplement) is in a sense inverted. It would seem that the mark comes first.
4. If we take this logical reordering seriously, then it would seem that “full presence” is in fact an illusory effect of language (or something produced by language). Meaning is not out there waiting to be worded. Rather, words as they come into being word the world. Consequently, the signifier does not represent the signified, but brings it into “presence”—brings it into being as an effect.
5. Therefore, the figure of the linguistic sign (with its unity linking signifier and signified) is no longer adequate to the task of understanding how language works, and Derrida replaces the figure of the sign with that of the “mark”. The “mark” is an indicator of absence rather than presence. It exists in the form of the trace, the graphic representation of the word prior to its signification.

To summarise, Derrida’s discussion of the mark demonstrates the unravelling of the binary distinction between speech (as indicative of presence) and writing (as supplement). This distinction depended on the passage from fully present non-linguistic truth passing through into the words of the speaking subject present to that truth. This subject could then turn to the supplementary function of writing. However, if the “mark” comes first, then, in a sense, writing comes first. However, our understandings of presence, speech and writing have all suffered a sea change—writing can no longer be thought of as simply the secondary representation of speech. Speech is not bound to “presence”, as “presence” is an effect of the mark. When Derrida talks about “writing” he is referring to a “general” writing, which need not be thought of as the word on the page. So, for example, a social group whose culture does not involve writing (in the traditional sense) is still subject to writing in the general sense. The fact that the mark may not take a materialised form is, in a sense, immaterial. So, when Lévi-Strauss maintains that African tribes, because they do not write (in the traditional sense) are in some ways more innocent than Westerners, he fails to recognise the general writing, the “markness” that characterises their language.

So far we have considered a synchronic picture of language. The other dimension of *différance* can only be accounted for if we move beyond this to a diachronic picture of language in use. As Derrida notes, for words to mean anything at all they have to be repeatable and repeated, iterable and reiterated, they have to be “used” and used over time. It is this dimension of *différance* that is handled explicitly in ‘Signature Event Context’. It is in this essay that Derrida presents his most famous treatment of Austin.

## Austin, Derrida and Context

Derrida’s interest in Austin’s project derives in part from the latter’s recognition that in identifying the ways in which words can do things the focus moves away from thinking of language in terms of signification where words stand as markers for ideas, for some truth external to language, to an emphasis on “communicating a force through the impetus [impulsion] of a mark” (Derrida, 1988, p. 13). We should note here that for Derrida, the notion of the mark acts as a replacement for the sign. The sign, with its binary distinction between signifier and signified, remains trapped within the metaphysics of presence. It assumes some origin of meaning and a fullness that precedes the signifier. Derrida’s “mark” is the written word stripped of signification (emptied out of meaning) that indicates a presence in the form of a trace. The mark indicates presence, yet in Derrida’s terms it exists as the absent origin—the mark stripped of meaning. Meaning/concept is an effect produced through the force (the impetus) of the mark. To understand things in this way is to understand all meaning as textual—there is no outside text<sup>5</sup>. When Austin shows how issuing a performative utterance is not to report on language, but to indulge in it, he appears to recognise the impossibility of adopting a stance that is not external to language. This is why Derrida notes that:

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<sup>5</sup> This is a literal translation of Derrida’s famous formulation “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte”. As Attridge notes, “this phrase does not mean “the things we normally consider to be outside the text do not exist” but “there is nothing that completely escapes the general properties of textuality, *différance* etc.”—that is, as Derrida goes on to explain, no “natural presence” that can be known “in itself”. But it is also true that here is no inside the text, since this would again imply an inside/outside boundary” (Attridge in Derrida, 1992, p. 102). The more famous (though less exact) translation is “there is nothing beyond the text”.



As opposed to the classical assertion, to the constative utterance, the performative does not have its referent (but here the word is certainly no longer appropriate, and this precisely is the interest of the discovery) outside of itself or, in any event, before and in front of itself. It does not describe something that exists outside language and prior to it. (Derrida 1988, p. 13)

Derrida argues that Austin has shattered the concept of communication as a purely semiotic, linguistic, or symbolic concept. Communication is no longer considered in terms of 'transference of semantic content' or fixed in its orientation towards truth. Derrida praises Austin's patience and openness, the fact that the work is in constant transformation, that it acknowledges its impasses<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, despite the fact that for Austin meaning no longer has a 'referent in the form of a thing or of a prior or exterior state of things', Derrida argues that Austin undoes all his good work by missing something important about the structure of locution which effects the ternary distinction between locutions, illocutions and perlocutions.

What does this amount to? It seems to have everything to do with the importance to Austin's project of an exhaustively determined context. One of the essential elements to this 'remains, classically, consciousness, the conscious presence of the speaking subject in the totality of his speech act'. Performative communication is bound up with intentional meaning:

The conscious presence of speakers or receivers participating in the accomplishment of a performative, their conscious and intentional presence in the totality of the operation implies teleologically that no *residue [reste]* escapes the present totalisation. (Derrida, 1988, p. 14)

I take this to mean that Austin, having shown how the outside to language invoked by the 'referent in the form of a thing or a prior exterior state of things' (ibid.) breaks down in the colonisation of the constative by performative concerns, then goes on to reinstate external presence in the figure of the speaking subject. The success of an

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<sup>6</sup> In his essay "Truth", Austin writes: "in philosophy the foot of the letter is the foot of the ladder" (Austin, 1964b, p. 19). Here there is a clear affinity between Austin and Derrida.

utterance depends on whether or not my words do what I intend them to do: ‘therefore we find an exhaustibly definable context, of a free consciousness present to the totality of the operation, and of absolutely meaningful speech master of itself: the teleological jurisdiction of an entire field whose organising center remains intention’ (ibid). If my intentions succeed they must do so with due ‘correctness’ and ‘completeness’. This can only be accomplished if other factors (felicity conditions external to the utterance) are in place. If the priest is not qualified to marry me, then I will not be married. Derrida notes that Austin’s procedure is

rather remarkable and typical of that philosophical tradition with which he would like to have so few ties. It consists in recognizing that the possibility of the negative (in this case, of infelicities) is in fact a structural possibility, that failure is an essential risk of the operations under consideration; then in a move which is almost *immediately simultaneous*, in the name of a kind of ideal regulation, it excludes that risk as accidental, exterior, one which teaches us nothing about the linguistic phenomenon being considered...Thus, for example, concerning the conventionality without which there is no performative, Austin acknowledges that *all* conventional acts are exposed to failure: ‘it seems clear in the first place that, although it has excited us (or failed to excite us) in connexion with certain acts which are or are in part acts of *uttering words*, infelicity is an ill to which *all* acts are heir which have the general character of ritual or ceremonial, all *conventional* acts: not indeed that *every* ritual is liable to every form of infelicity (but then nor is every performative utterance)’ (Austin’s emphasis). (Derrida, 1988, p. 15)

Derrida notes, and applauds, Austin’s interest in the “negative”, in communicative failure. In this respect, Austin’s project seems in line with non-analytical strands of philosophy. However, Austin then seems to take a step backwards by focusing solely on the contextual surroundings “the conventionality constituting the *circumstance* of the utterance” (ibid.). Derrida’s point is that Austin misses the conventionality intrinsic to what constitutes the speech act [locution itself]. He notes that: ‘Ritual is not a possible occurrence, but rather, *as* iterability, a structural characteristic of every mark’

(ibid.). What does this amount to? It seems that words if they are to mean anything at all, must be repeatable and repeated as ritual. Derrida's point is that language is itself performative and exercises force in its own right. Austin's mistake is to move away from the "wordness" (the "graphematic" aspects) of language to concentrate on forces that enact themselves on language and are thought to be somehow exterior to it. For Derrida, words are subject to an internal force and movement. It is not the case (as Austin might have it) that the context determines the force of words. Rather, an unlimited number of possible contexts are internal to the words themselves. The word or concept is never at one with itself. Derrida insists that he is not referring to the polysemy<sup>7</sup> of language but its iterability. If we perceive the forces in language to be external, then the context determines meaning. Of course, the organising centre of context in Austin is the individual speaking subject. To show how this particular contextual feature comes under duress, it will be helpful to consider what Derrida has to say about signatures.

## Signatures

Derrida notes that it is the critique of linguisticism<sup>8</sup> that most interests him about Austin—that 'no single, simple criterion of grammar and "vocabulary" can distinguish constatives from performatives' (ibid, p. 19). However, Derrida notes that Austin explains his preference for the present-indicative-active voice—'I promise' 'I christen this...' 'I...' -in non-linguistic terms. Despite not being in favour of linguisticism, a move away from language is not what (in Derrida's eyes) is called for. Derrida's suspicion relates to what Austin calls the 'source' (the translator notes that Austin's term is "utterance-*origin*") of the linguistic utterance, the "I" that does something with words. Derrida notes that Austin both has no doubt that 'the source of an oral utterance in the present indicative active is *present* to the utterance' and that this is equally true in written (in its conventional sense) examples:

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<sup>7</sup> Polysemy comes into play when a word that has two or more similar meanings. Consider the phrases "the house stood at the foot of the hill" and "he liked to stand on one foot".

<sup>8</sup> Here "linguisticism" refers to the tendency to try and define what utterances are and what they do in accordance with semantic or grammatical rules.

When there is *not*, in the verbal formula of the utterance, a reference to the person doing the uttering, and so the acting, by means of the pronoun “I” (or by his personal name), then in fact he will be ‘referred to’ in one of two ways:

(a) In verbal utterances, *by his being the person who does the uttering*—what we may call the *utterance-origin* which is used generally in any system of verbal reference-co-ordinates.

(b) In written utterances (or ‘inscriptions’), *by his appending his signature* (this has to be done because, of course, written utterances are not tethered to their origin in the way spoken ones are) (Austin cited in Derrida 1988, pp. 19-20)

So, the source of the utterance is the speaking subject in cases of speech, and in written form appears as the signature. My presence as speaking subject is manifested in written form in the guise of my signature. Let us begin by looking at the written example and consider issues of “source” or “origin” as they pertain to it. Problems immediately arise when we consider the question: when do I write my signature for the first time? Commonsense might indicate that this occurs when I first scribble down that mark that is to become my signature. However, to suggest it will “become” my signature suggests that it is not my signature yet. If this is true, then the first occasion of my signature might be the first time I write it on a cheque or a form. Unfortunately, this is also inaccurate, because for it to be my signature it has to be repeated. Are we then bound to the strange conclusion that the second time I put the mark of my signature on a form or cheque is the first time I have used my signature? No, because the whole point of my signature being my signature is that it must be repeated endlessly as ritual.

It will be helpful to consider how issues pertaining to context fit in here. Every time I write my signature, I do so in a different context—my signature is in some way different each time it makes an appearance. The “significance” attached to signing a marriage license or signing a cheque is quite different. By the same token, my signature carries with it, its old contexts and is in a sense full of the contexts in which it will enter. In a radical sense, it is not at one with itself, nor is it under my direct control, even though it functions as my representative in my absence. More than this its previous, present and future contexts are internal to it.

If we see the signature as in some way “out of joint”, might this simply represent the lack of fullness/presence that is traditionally ascribed to writing in contrast to speech? After all Austin notes that written utterances are not tethered to their origin in the ways spoken ones are. For Derrida, to see things in this way is to miss the wordness of our understanding of things. What is applicable to signatures is applicable to all words. Just as the “mark” on the page represents the absent trace of my signature, the same thing is true of all words. Consequently, what applies to the signature applies to language in general regardless of whether it is “written” (in the traditional sense of the word) or not. Just as the signature appears to indicate full presence to my words, this illusory quality vis-à-vis presence also applies to the speaking subject. This control of context and therefore meaning is central to the tradition that has given speech a particular dominance in the linguistic hierarchy over writing. Derrida, in showing that words carry their contexts with them, means that the fullness and completeness, the presence ascribed to the speech situation, is never fully realised; never mind the force of the present context, the words will not allow it.

Through his adherence to the law of iterability Derrida is, in a sense, putting forward a general theory—all words and utterances are subject to iterability—the ways in which this manifests itself will vary, but all words are essentially iterable. Derrida seems to sense that Austin anticipates problems concerning a general unhappiness that applies to language but turns away from it: at one point Austin wonders if there is not: ‘some very general high-level doctrine’ that might ‘embrace both what we have called infelicities *and* these other “unhappy” features of the doing of actions—in our case actions containing a performative utterance—in a single doctrine’ (Austin cited in Derrida, 1988, p. 16). However, he maintains that he is not concerned with this kind of unhappiness and notes that: ‘Features of this sort would normally come under the heading of “extenuating circumstances” or of “factors reducing or abrogating the agent’s responsibility” (ibid.). Derrida argues that Austin is referring here to quotation—every performative utterance—indeed every utterance can be quoted. But for Austin, this possibility is both ‘abnormal’ and ‘parasitic’ (ibid)—it should not be regarded as a feature of the “ordinary” or of ordinary language. Here we might note that Austin’s identification of the “ordinary” is resistant to the notion of words being somehow taken out into the ether, untethered from their original source. Yet, as we

have already seen (Derrida has shown us), words are never under our direct control in the first place. More than this, the repetition of words, the fact that they can be and are subject to quotation is a factor that is internal to language and the very condition for anything to mean anything. In turning away from this ‘general doctrine’ Austin looks inward to the singularity of the individual utterance and the specificity of the total speech act situation. Derrida captures the problems pertaining to this inward turn when he discusses the linguistic event.

## Events

It is necessary at this point to recognise what might seem like an obvious objection to Derrida’s development of locutions. It would appear that people have got married and boats have been christened. Indeed, if people fail to get married despite the issuing of the utterance ‘I now declare you man and wife’ then this may be to do with the kinds of unhappiness that Austin identifies. Derrida maintains that this is ‘perhaps’ (Derrida, 1988, p. 17) the case, but surely there is something grudging, absurd, or deliberately obtuse about saying ‘perhaps’—one might imagine that Derrida’s wife would not be too pleased. Of course, Derrida cannot, in a straightforward sense, be suggesting that such things do not occur. Rather, it is the ‘pure singularity of the event’ that is in doubt. To think that there can be a “pure singularity of the event”, is to be caught in the grip of a false metaphysics and a false security vis-à-vis language. It is this false security that Derrida wishes to expose and move beyond. There is of course a genuine security that we ordinarily have in our lives—people do get married. Moreover, the fact that ‘I now declare you man and wife’ or ‘I christen this ship the...’ make any sense and represent instances of doing things with words is because they are iterable in structure:

I take things up here from the perspective of positive possibility and not simply as instances of failure or infelicity: would a performative utterance be possible if a citational doubling [*doublure*] did not come to split and dissociate from itself the pure singularity of the event? (ibid.)

The formulations ‘I now pronounce...’, etc., could only succeed if they repeated a coded or iterable utterance. They are citations. This is of course a different citationality

to a poem, a philosophical reference. This is why there is a “relative purity” (p. 18) of performatives. However, this is not in opposition to citationality or iterability, but to “other kinds of iteration within a general iterability”, which represents a ‘violation’ of the “allegedly rigorous purity of every event of discourse”. Therefore we must not oppose the event to iterability. Rather we must consider the different kinds of iterability and security that apply to our words (a very Austinian task!). The category of intention here does not go away but will not govern ‘the entire scene and system of utterance’ (ibid.). The intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content. To recognise the iterability of language—to steer clear of the ‘lure of consciousness’—prohibits any ‘saturation of the context’:

By no means do I draw the conclusion that there is no relative specificity of effects of consciousness, or of effects of speech (as opposed to writing in the traditional sense), that there is no performative effect, no effect of ordinary language, no effect of presence or of discursive event (speech act). It is simply that those effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them, term by term; on the contrary, they presuppose it, in an asymmetrical way, as the general space of their possibility. (p. 19)

Therefore, of course, we can say that marrying takes place and can go wrong in the ways identified by Austin, but this does not imply that the fullness he associates with the ways in which words get things done is ever realised. The kinds of failure that Austin refers to come after the initial “failure” in which words are not subject to an absolute form of contextual control due to the essential iterability internal to them. To see things in this way is to bypass the “endless alternation of essence and accident”—the idea that things would be “essentially so, if it were not for the fact that external contextual factors prohibit this from always being the case. For Austin infelicity is posed as a trap or abyss that language may fall into. This trap surrounds language like a “ditch” or “external place of perdition” which can be avoided by remaining “at home” in the shelter of the “essence” or “telos” (p. 17). Derrida notes that Austin does not consider the fact that infelicity should be seen as a law, that a possible risk is a necessary possibility. He does not consider what success might mean once the possibility of infelicity continues to constitute the structure of an utterance.

Of course to talk of infelicity here is to make a value judgement. It means seeing words as in some ways impervious to the control of the speaking subject as something bad. If we agree that any words we use are iterable, then what they do is not entirely under our control. To say “not entirely” is to account for the relative specificity of effects of consciousness. Nevertheless, there is a decided danger of uncritically adhering to the uniqueness and singularity of linguistic acts—their eventness. The fact that we see things in terms of singularity and uniqueness means that we are trapped in the metaphysical eventness of events and this involves shutting our eyes to the creative possibilities of language. It is therefore necessary to move beyond the stultifying terms of “success” and “failure” for these terms only serve to stifle the ordinary ways in which words can take us somewhere else and already are, in some sense, somewhere else—they are not “ours”. To do this requires us to adopt a simultaneously active and passive approach to language. In the following discussion, we will see what this amounts to in regards to teaching and learning.

## Lessons and Events

In the current British educational climate, teachers are expected to know what giving a good lesson involves. They should also know what one has to “do” (or not “do”) if one is to give an “outstanding”, “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” lesson. In short, if teachers are unfamiliar with the criteria for success and failure, then the latter is the most likely outcome. There is a strange artificiality that seems to accompany the categories “unsatisfactory”, “satisfactory”, “good” and “outstanding”—during my time as a teacher in a comprehensive school, I vividly recall a talk in which the speaker informed us that “satisfactory” no longer meant satisfactory<sup>9</sup>. What this story reveals is a certain kind of scepticism in the face of language—that “satisfactory” no longer means satisfactory reveals a deep suspicion of how words ordinarily do what they do<sup>10</sup>. In this paper, I want to bring attention to linguistic issues pertaining to the role played

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<sup>9</sup> The words “unsatisfactory”, “satisfactory”, “good” and “outstanding” have simply come to denote a set of characteristics that lessons may or may not conform to. For British inspectors, lessons that are found to be satisfactory now demonstrate an unacceptable set of characteristics. We might also note that from the perspective every teacher could in theory be labelled “outstanding”.

<sup>10</sup> Though this article deals with universal issues pertaining to language and teaching it also presents a “localised” critique of pedagogical practice in British schools that will hopefully be of interest to an international audience.



by contextual factors when establishing whether or not teaching fails or succeeds. Such contextual factors are often alluded to or brought in to counter the perceived dangers of language. Teachers should not talk too much and what they say should be utterly transparent. In the meantime, they should make sure that they supply seating plans etc. to gain maximum control of the classroom so that learning takes place. The philosophical material that guides this discussion derives from Jacques Derrida's reading of Austin's theory of the performative utterance (found in Derrida's famous essay "Signature Event Context")<sup>11</sup>. As we shall see, Derrida's reading of Austin is by no means wholly critical. The former finds much that is interesting and important in Austin's philosophical project. Indeed, Derrida applauds Austin's ability to show how the language of truth is bound up with the language of performance. However, he argues that Austin's overdetermined treatment of context misses something important about the functioning of language<sup>12</sup>. In the last part of the chapter, I will attempt to show how Derrida's discussion of context and what is meant by a linguistic "event" creates a space for questioning deeply held assumptions about "successful" teaching and learning and the understanding of "failure" that accompanies such assumptions. Before, delving into the complexities of Derrida's argument it may be helpful to provide an outline of Austin's work on performatives.

When considering what Derrida's discussion surrounding iterability, context and events have to do with teaching and learning, we might begin by drawing an analogy between what is currently regarded (in Britain) as "successful learning" and the notion of infelicity or unhappiness that plays such an important part in Austin's theory of the performative utterance. A successful or happy lesson as it conventionally understood<sup>13</sup> nowadays must take on board numerous contextual factors (felicity conditions?). So, for example, a good teacher will do the following things (this is not an exhaustive list):

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<sup>11</sup> The introduction of Derrida as a voice to challenge linguistic scepticism in education might seem strange to some readers. Derrida is often presented as a sceptic through and through who champions the view that you can never be sure what anything means. What this paper hopes to show is that the kind of scepticism that has emerged in education is based on a false metaphysics that Derrida's philosophy helps to counter.

<sup>12</sup> To question the extent to which context determines meaning is perhaps particularly apposite in the current educational climate. Reference to context has become a safe philosophical move that appears to display sensitivity and an appropriate depth of understanding. Paying lip service to context has become a mantra, an obstacle to thought. It is important to note that though an analogy will be drawn in this article between Austin's treatment of context and the role context plays in modern pedagogy, the analogy is necessarily loose (see footnote 11).

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the "happiness" referred to here relates to "effectiveness" and is not meant to allude to positive psychology's treatment of the former.

1. She must place the learning objectives/outcomes on the board and make it clear from the beginning of the lesson exactly what it is that is going to be learnt that day.
2. The teacher should ensure that the learning outcomes are differentiated at the outset so that different things are required of different learners with different abilities.
3. Tasks should be differentiated in accordance with both ability/attainment levels and different learning styles, kinaesthetic, auditory and visual.
4. The lesson should incorporate group tasks and individual tasks in which learners work independently.
5. Students should be provided with the tools to assess their work
6. Behavioural issues should be accounted for through the use of various techniques for example a seating plan that locates students in accordance with their behavioural needs.
7. Activities should be timed in accordance with the anticipation that students may go off-task.
8. Whether or not learning has taken place should be assessed at the end of the lesson through adherence to the learning objectives/outcomes.

The above list represents examples drawn from the set of contextual factors that should be in place for successful (happy?) learning to take place. This notion of success is built into the idea that more old-fashioned pedagogies (if they even deserved the name) failed to account for all sorts of factors necessary to successful communication. Indeed, there are good reasons for thinking that adherence to these contextual factors represents progress in the realm of pedagogy. It seems likely that taking account of different abilities, attributes and behavioural characteristics will prevent the kind of confusion, boredom, or chaos that simply ignoring such factors might engender. Equally, there is surely much to recommend the inclusion of different kinds of task, which encourage group or independent learning. What should be noted (and we will return to this) is that most of things listed above are things we do with words—which is to say things we *do* with words.

This paper does not aim to debunk the predilections of contemporary pedagogy. However, through adherence to Derrida's reading of Austin, we might see that current approaches to teaching and learning miss something important about context, and how what is missed out is not wholly dissimilar to what is left out of Austin's philosophy when he talks about the total speech act situation. For both Austin and adherents of the contemporary pedagogical norms, context is thought of solely in terms of factors (that are not thought of as linguistic) that need to be in place for successful communication to take place.<sup>14</sup> So for example, the didacticism attributed to traditional forms of teaching is criticised because it is felt that if teachers simply talk to the class or discuss issues with them, then only a certain kind of student (able, auditory, good at concentrating) will benefit. It appears that what is at issue here, is the teacher's role as a kind of master—the teacher knows what he is talking about and understands the truth of what he professes yet things go wrong (or become unhappy) because simply speaking to the class will not ensure that whatever is in the teacher's head will end up in the student's heads. It should, however, be noted that the contemporary teacher is also expected to be a master, but it is more important that this mastery involves control over contextual factors than knowledge (the teacher's knowledge is taken for granted). Consequently, we might note that constative/truth concerns are not at issue here, it is the successful transmission of the constative that is at stake. The assumption here is in keeping with a view of knowledge that sees it as something that floats above us waiting to be communicated in either a successful or unsuccessful way. It is this view of language that had been undermined by Austin in his discussion of the performative aspects of speech.

We might argue that taking the constative for granted in this way represents a deep suspicion of language. Teachers are often told not to speak too much and when they do

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to recognise that several things distinguish Austin from the pedagogues. To begin with, the latter take the constative for granted whereas Austin does not. Also, the "extra-linguistic" factors that Austin refers to are somewhat different to those that are a feature of modern pedagogy. As mentioned earlier, people do get married. When they fail to do so, this is due to a fairly exceptional set of circumstances. Moreover, the contextual factors Austin alludes to are not annexed to utterances in a forced manner. The manipulation of context that characterises fashionable teaching methods is of a rather different order to the treatment of context in Austin's work. We do not wilfully construct authenticity. That said, Austin's philosophy still presents an overly simplistic and overdetermined treatment of context.

speaking they should be as clear as possible, otherwise meaning will go awry, their utterances will not be understood. This is surely to acquiesce in securities that are unwarranted. Is there “always” a danger that students will misunderstand what has been said? If teachers were to come across some examples of poststructuralist writing on education they might be forgiven for thinking that such fears are justified. I am thinking here of the discussion of strong emergence in Osberg and Biesta’s ‘Beyond Presence: Epistemological and Pedagogical Implications of ‘Strong’ Emergence’ (Osberg and Biesta, 2007). Though this article shares some common ground with Osberg and Biesta’s, scepticism is closer at hand there than it is here.

The issue that is at stake here concerns whether when teachers speak (particularly when they, heaven forefend, speak “for a long time”), they are generally misunderstood. To recognise the iterability of language does not lead to scepticism (which would be based on a false metaphysics of the constative) but openness to the flexibility of language and meaning. To speak of flexibility is to take a positive stance on linguistic complexity. If we are constantly afraid that meaning will “go awry” we will be bound by the kind of value judgement about failure implicit to Austin’s argument. It repeats the suspicion of writing and literariness that runs through the tradition of Western philosophy. Yet, As Derrida shows, the very possibility of communication is dependent on the iterability of language, and this iterability requires a necessary division that means words are not at one with themselves. Consequently, trying to pin words down through excessive adherence to clarity is destined to failure, but this is only “failure” because communication is thought of here as something that must be full and transparent. I am not suggesting that teachers should give up on clarity, but rather that they should be aware of its limitations. Moreover, clarity as such is not simply a contextual quality that can be brought in from outside, or ticked off on a list, it is a quality that pertains to the utterance itself—a facet of a certain way in which we indulge in language.

It is perhaps an overdetermined understanding of success and failure that accompanies the more stifling aspects of modern pedagogy. Success is dependent on absolute control of what is being learnt and how it is being learnt. If lessons are to be fully-fledged “events” then what will be learnt must always be known in advance and necessarily circular (objectives will be returned to at the end of the lesson). It might be argued that to see things otherwise, to embrace the iterability of language will simply

lead to chaos. How will we know if anything has been learnt at all? It should be noted here that “presence” (manifested in the truth of how things are) as an effect of iterability is not something that Derrida seeks to deny or escape from. Rather, seeing presence as an effect of language is to be open to what teaching or “professing” the truth amounts to. Here is Standish:

Derrida explores ways in which the idea of profession requires something tantamount to a pledge, to the freely accepted responsibility to profess the truth. The professor enacts this performative continually in her work: what she says is testimony to the truth; as work it is necessarily an orientation to a to-come. The academic work of professing must then be something more than the (purely constative) statement of how things are. (Standish, 2001, p. 18)

Here Derrida’s argument is subtle; professing<sup>15</sup> the truth is about orientating students towards something that neither professor nor student can necessarily predict in which the constative will always be performed as the to-come (an aspect of the future) rather than a statement of that which is secure, of the past, is somehow originary. To take the constative for granted is to ignore its performative/iterable aspect. Here we can see that the identification of, and return to, the aims of the lesson and prescribed outcomes, can lead to an impoverished treatment of the areas that are being covered. This partly derives from the constative value that will invariably be ascribed to the outcomes of the lesson; that what will be learnt is known in advance and is in some way foundational. Consequently, the structure of the lesson can drastically inhibit the development of a learning process that has the potential to dramatically veer away from the progression mapped out by that very structure. Here is Standish paraphrasing Derrida:

The responsibility of the professor extends beyond the performatives of criticism to an openness to the event. It must extend beyond the ‘masterable’ possible’, which is the result of conventions and legitimate fictions, to the surprise of the impossible possible, which has the character of the arrivant. Openness to the impossible possible,

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<sup>15</sup> As we shall see this account of professing is radically at odds with what tends to count as “professionalism” today.

something beyond the range of predetermined categories or a purely autonomous control (effective performance), is essential to the exercise and growth of the imagination that this professing requires. (ibid.)

It should be noted that for Standish/Derrida the “event” here is a quite different thing to the kind of “event” referred to earlier. When Derrida talks about an “event” in Austin’s philosophy” he is referring to the “legitimate fiction” of the masterable possible”—the idea that words are under our direct subjective control. Here, “eventness” can only characterise things in a full planned sense in which all possibility of failure has been eradicated. Of course such an event can never take place in any full sense. In contrast this other kind of event attains its “eventness” from the fact that it is completely unplanned—it arrives. Indeed, the very fact that such an event can take place is dependent on the iterability of language, whereby our words find themselves in unfamiliar territory and “do” unexpected things.

As Biesta notes in his article ‘Witnessing Deconstruction in Education’ (Biesta, 2009) the idea of the “arrivant”, is central to Derrida’s understanding of deconstruction: ““Deconstructions”, which I prefer to say in the plural . . . is one of the possible names to designate . . . what occurs [*ce qui n’arrive pas à arriver*], namely a radical dislocation, which in effect reiterates regularly—and wherever there is something rather than nothing’ (Derrida cited in Biesta, 2009, p. 394). Following Biesta, it is important to note that this treatment of deconstruction radically differs from its treatment in much literature where it has come to denote a (“destructive”) form of critique. Deconstruction is not something that one “does” but something that “occurs”. Moreover:

all deconstruction is “auto-deconstruction” (see Derrida, 1997, p. 9)—deconstruction “occurs”, whether we want it or not. But that doesn’t mean that there is nothing to do in relation to deconstruction. While it’s not up to us to let deconstruction happen or prevent it from happening, what we can do is to show, to reveal, or, as Bennington (2000, p. 11) has suggested, to *witness* the occurrence of deconstruction or to be more precise, to witness *metaphysics-in-deconstruction*. (ibid.)

It is precisely this “witnessing” of “metaphysics-in-deconstruction” that Derrida’s account of professing alludes to. The metaphysics that undergoes deconstruction is the metaphysics of the constative. Biesta raises the question of why it is important to witness metaphysics in deconstruction. To some degree we have already answered this, in the sense that the metaphysics of the constative presents a false picture of meaning. However, there is clearly more at stake here and this relates to the fact that a particular “presence” makes other ways of seeing invisible. To witness is therefore ‘to do justice to the ‘other’ of presence’. This shows that ‘the point of deconstruction is not negative or destructive but first and foremost *affirmative*. . . It is an affirmation of what is excluded and forgotten; an affirmation of what is *other*’ (p. 395). The emergence of this otherness “the arrivant” is unforeseeable and “impossible”: ‘For Derrida ‘the impossible’ is not what is *impossible* but what cannot be foreseen as a possibility’ (ibid.).

Taking all this into account we can say that “professing” or teaching with deconstruction in mind is about bearing witness to what is excluded, to what is other. To see things this way is not to simply champion “openness” as an educational aim but is an attempt to do justice to what has been excluded and show “hospitality” towards the impossible other that waits at the door. If we ignore this, communication can only be viewed as a “strictly mechanical, a strictly calculable and predictable process” (Biesta, p. 399). Moreover, it is “precisely at the limit of intelligibility that the question of ethics emerges” (Bergdahl, 2009, p. 42)

I should note at this point that the argument presented in this paper departs from Biesta’s understanding of “witnessing” in some important respects. For Biesta, one of the reasons that deconstruction takes place and the arrivant arrives is because communication between sender and receiver must fail due to the fact that the receiver will always “interpret” what is sent (Biesta, pp. 396-397). One cannot make a direct comparison between linguistic communication and signals sent from the “TV studio to another location such as the home” (p. 396). Though, to a degree, I am in agreement with Biesta on these matters, I wonder if his argument moves toward an overly humanistic or “personal” vision of Derrida’s philosophy and the possibilities that

philosophy offers to thinking about education<sup>16</sup>. As we saw in an earlier section of this article ‘Signatures’, the speaking subject is an effect of presence and undergoes deconstruction. It is therefore not the act of interpretation that issues in the arrivant, but the iterability of language that splits the subject, just as it splits the constative. This is not to say that interpretation is unimportant but rather that it is a secondary complication. Though communication is of course impossible without subjects engaging in discourse, subjectivity itself emerges through language, it is an effect of language. Words (and, if you like, their absent traces) come first. It is for this reason that the arrivant can make an appearance when one is performing “more” solitary tasks such as writing.

The humanistic flavour of Biesta’s account also makes itself known in the literal translation of the “arrivant” as the “newcomer”<sup>17</sup> which does not just speak of “new beginnings” but “new beginners” (p. 400). In contrast, we might think of the arrivant as something darker, more akin to the spectres and ghosts that haunt Derrida’s writing. The “arrivant is also a revenant” (Attridge, 2001). This darkness is not an inherent quality that pertains to the arrivant, but is generated by its challenge to the metaphysics of presence, to what “is”. With this in mind, from the perspective of modern pedagogy, the appearance of the arrivant must generate consternation and unhappiness. Confusion will ensue. How can we assess the class on what has just happened? The mark scheme cannot account for the unexpected. Nevertheless, to wish the event had not occurred will not banish or exorcise it. One can quickly move on to the next fast paced task and pretend that nothing has happened, yet surely, the “happier” (more hospitable?) option is to embrace the arrivant, to face and perhaps affirm our fear of the unexpected. This will not produce anarchy. And I am not proposing some whimsical, unstructured approach to the planning of lessons. The professor should make a stand, but that stand is performative; it opens up and embraces new possibilities. Teachers regularly find that interesting things happen in lessons that affect the structure; that take the lesson into unforeseen territory. Though there can be complete break-ups of structure, for good or ill, this is not what I am advocating. Rather, I am thinking of the ways in which

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<sup>16</sup> Biesta’s reading of “Signature, Event Context” is similar to my own. However, one significant difference is that Biesta associates Derrida’s account of communicative failure with complications surrounding the receiver’s interpretation of the message (Biesta, 2009, p.399).

<sup>17</sup> Biesta does not explicitly mention the arrivant here, but I take it as read that this is what he is referring to.



a surprise question or unexpected occurrence can alter the structure of the lesson. Aspects that were otherwise hidden will come to the fore in ways that are fruitful. Unfortunately, the current orthodoxy encourages teachers against seeing this as something positive and creative. This orthodoxy is blind to the enhanced potential for learning that the readiness for deconstruction indicated above might provide.

As mentioned earlier, this paper does not aim to pour scorn on modern teaching methods. Making the aims of the lesson as transparent as possible can certainly help some students to feel more comfortable with what is being learnt yet this is to indulge in language in a particular way (it is not to bring in a manipulative technique from an imaginary extra-linguistic zone). By the same token, helping students to come to grips with the assessment process has its benefits, but this too can only benefit from recognition of the subtleties and complexities of language<sup>18</sup>. If the teacher does not take account of the needs of particular students, then a certain amount of unhappiness will ensue. Indeed, if teachers do not try and account for certain factors then their lessons may become chaotic, or deeply confusing. However, the ways in which teachers take account of these factors is often bound up with how they use words. Working with detailed seating plans and consistent routines may have benefits. However, in my experience, good working relationships with students develop in accordance with a more flexible approach to behavioural issues that involves “indulging” in “banter”. To exchange jokes and mild insults with children is, in a sense to be open to the “event” as Derrida uses the word—surprising things can emerge from this kind of linguistic scenario. Of course, one might argue that “banter” is simply a distraction from the purposes of the lesson but this surely reflects a very limited conception of what teaching and learning can involve.

Ultimately, the fear of communicative failure clearly has a troubling impact on the ways in which teachers are encouraged to use language. To see the lesson as a singular event in which every possible measure must be taken to ensure transparent communication reflects a paranoia deriving from overdetermined considerations

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<sup>18</sup> My experience of working as an examiner represented a particularly severe induction into the religion of the constative, for, as Biesta notes, assessment is “the mechanism that constantly tries to close the gap between teaching and learning. It does this by saying “this is right” and “this is wrong”—and, more often, by saying “you are right” and “you are wrong”. In a sense it is as simple as that. But because the slippage is there all the time, achieving closure in education requires an enormous amount of effort (Biesta, 2009, p. 398).

regarding success and failure. The fear of failure that haunts the teacher and school is the product of bad metaphysics. As this paper hopefully shows, getting out of this metaphysical trap (through finding a better metaphysics) would help us to live better with our necessary and inevitable “failures” and the possibilities of teaching and learning they afford. To move beyond paranoia is to reinstate the importance of what the teacher and student have to say. As regards the teacher’s words, this is not an appeal to didacticism, but to acknowledge that words require breathing room. The appearance of the arrivant need not be such a painful business.

## **Language, Numbers and Statistics**

So far, we have looked at the ways in which an overdetermined understanding of context in the classroom, combined with a certain fear of language, can serve to block richer possibilities of teaching and learning. This kind of blockage is of course an effect of Lyotard’s performativity and is reinforced by other factors that exact an equally debilitating act on classroom practice. I am thinking here of the predilection for numbers/statistics in contemporary education along with the proliferation of slogans. The subsequent parts of the chapter will handle each of these in turn. I now want to explore the role of statistics in performativity more directly and the ways in which the utilisation of statistics involves doing something with words. Numbers (and this is something we possibly forget) are words and moreover they are iterable—we might talk of 20 bags of potatoes or 20 people shot for insurrection—the number 20 finds itself in different contexts in which it will resonate in different ways. Moreover, throughout the rich history of language various numbers have become “significant”. There are plenty of examples of this, some of which involve numbers in combination, some of which require (or perhaps do not require) explanation. Let us list some: 13 (unlucky for some) 666 (the number of the beast), 69 (I am not sure if this has resonance outside Britain, though the pervasiveness of English suggests that it might), 99 (red balloons), 9/11, 6,000,000 (Jews killed in the Holocaust), 10 (the number usually worn by the best player in an international football team). Certain numbers take on a moral status. An ethical significance attaches itself to some of these numbers, notably 666, 69 and 6,000,000. Moreover, one of the numbers is a statistic (we’ll come back to this shortly, though we might note that 6,000,000 is usually written as six

million as though there were something obscene about using polynomial/positional notation here).

Now, clearly, the numbers used above are iterable, they will find themselves in all manner of contexts in which their previous contexts will necessarily play some sort of role. Moreover, they gained their performative force from being repeated. One cannot mention 6,000,000 anything without thinking about the Holocaust. If the number 69 appears in the national lottery this will provoke a degree of smirking and general titillation around the country. 999 is the British number of the emergency services but turn it on its head and. . . Even the most confirmed atheist may look over her shoulder just to make sure that a little red man with a tail and horns isn't standing behind her.

Though numbers are iterable, they are iterable in a very specific way. Moreover, they are not iterable in the same way that other kinds of word are. When we looked at what can happen with the number/word 20 we must note that the fact that 20 can take on a different resonance is due to the words that surround it. The iterability of 20 here has nothing to do with the word/numeral itself. Moreover, the "meaning" of 20 does not change at all. In the case of 666, assuming one is not (too?) superstitious, the meaning that is attributed to it has nothing to do with where it has been before. In contrast let us take a word like "queer" which has come to denote homosexuality. Of course there is nothing about the word itself that relates to homosexuality, its passage from an insult expressing moral disapproval (homosexuality here is supposedly, strange, unedifying and unnatural) to being reclaimed by the gay community whereby the transgressive image of homosexuality is celebrated, reflects the complexity and richness of the iterable life of the word. Even apparently "functional" words like "both" "and" either and "or" express an extraordinary richness if one considers the role they have played in explaining deconstruction. This sort of richness cannot apply to numbers. Standish captures what is at stake here when he notes that numbers are untranslatable:

[T]here is the peculiar place of numbers in contemporary natural languages. Numbers, it seems, can appear in translations of texts in a way that is entirely without loss or distortion, and in this respect they are unlike the (more obviously) linguistic aspects of those texts. But in a sense this is to say that they cannot be translated at all—given that all

translations between natural languages do involve loss and distortion in some degree. To some, this will confirm the view that numbers achieve an ideal clarity of meaning, and indeed it is partly such a thought that lay behind the experiments with language in which Leibniz and others engaged. It is partly what computers achieve (and depend on). But to others, this will demonstrate the ways in which numbers fall short of the very qualities of meaning upon which our thought and being . . . depend. (Standish, forthcoming)

It is perhaps unnecessary to note that sympathy here lies with Standish's "others" and almost certainly, with Standish himself. Let us return to 666. In a sense what has happened to it is emblematic of the false metaphysics vis-à-vis language that Derrida's philosophy tries to overturn. The "attribution" of significance to 666 interestingly demonstrates a common misunderstanding of the ways in which language ordinarily works—666 (the signifier) "signifies" the devil (signified). As Derrida shows us, this kind of logocentrism is precisely undermined by difference and language's translatability/untranslatability. The fact that the significance of 666 has to be artificially attributed to it reveals the barrenness of numbers. They do not give birth to any kind of "becoming". Numbers are marks, but somehow not the "trace" of anything. In this sense, they tell a half-truth about language, as they are not the progeny of the metaphysics of presence. For Derrida, the metaphysics of presence is not a wholly bad thing—it is what allows meaning to take place. Paying uncritical lip service to it causes all the problems.

So far, we have looked at numbers and iterability. Statistics are of course numbers but not just any old numbers. Statistics supposedly represent something that is there, they offer the promise of a truth that is etched into the fabric of existence. Having looked at the some of the ways in which numbers can become iterable, and how this reflects a false metaphysics vis-à-vis language, we might say that something similar is going on with the symbolic practice of statistics. Just as 666 "signifies" the devil, statistics are supposed to "signify" some truth about the world. Consequently statistics as numbers look "clean". Now, the process of accumulating statistics is bound to be open to the linguistic slippages that apply to iterability as it generally works in language. However, when statistics are shown, and it is interesting that statistics are something we

ordinarily “show” (a point about aesthetics?) the processes behind the accumulation of statistics are not usually made explicit. This is true for debating politicians, or for school managers introducing statistics to teachers. The function that statistics perform in many of their common usages is to render invisible the complex processes that led to their status as data. This is what gives statistics the lure of purity—they suture over all the messy stuff that led to their generation and hide the “meaningful” process that takes place before and below. I want to draw explicit attention to the metaphor of the suture (a metaphor that Derrida regularly employs) here. Sutures are made up of non-toxic substances that can be absorbed by the body. Statistics, which, as numerals, “appear” pure, have been absorbed into educational practice.

That said, teachers are often critical of the data supplied on their classes. They will commonly complain about the targets their students are supposed to meet: “student x has been predicted a level 5—she’s never going to get that! It’s all a load of rubbish”. Here the teacher shows suspicion toward the statistics generated but it is unclear whether they think that a better treatment of the data would have yielded more accurate results; the implication seems to be that it would. The data that is given leads teachers to be suspicious, but this is always caught up in the dialectic with a truth that a better approach to statistics might yield. Please note that I am not suggesting that any student is capable of anything, but that judging “potential” should not be reduced to checking things off against data.

Let us not be too quick here. Paradoxically, though statistics present the promise of truth, they also present the threat of absolute scepticism. Though we might become inured to the performative force of statistics in our everyday working lives, this is never absolute. We are always dimly aware that statistics can be produced to make any case whatsoever. What this demonstrates is the paradoxical double bind accompanying statistics that can work in disorienting ways on teachers through their discourses and practices. Such disorientation arguably serves a purpose. If teachers are preoccupied with whether or not their statistics are accurate, or if they are suspicious of statistics generally, they may be less inclined to consider whether or not their teaching should be thought of in terms of effectiveness. I recently marked a group of essays on “inclusion” in which the students (who were trainee teachers) often pointed to statistical imperatives (as regards target grades) as an obstacle to wider concerns about

“including pupils”. These wider concerns related to the importance of effective teaching strategies to accommodate learning differences and the promotion of “self-esteem techniques”. They made it clear that we should not forget that the teaching assistant was the most important “learning resource”. What is most interesting about the views expressed in these essays is that the students clearly see no connection between effectiveness when thought of in terms of meeting statistical targets and the discourse of “effectiveness” *per se*. Of course, the very “techniques” they champion are those that are employed to gain value on statistics. Consequently we might say that just as statistics can take on a suturing function through the promise of the constative, they also serve to divide experience. They are set up as the enemy of better teaching, yet the very notion of what better teaching involves is inextricably bound up with statistics. The ultimate effect of this simultaneous suturing and division of experience is suturing at a meta-level. Performativity is served by the paradoxical nature and use of statistics.

## **Fixing the stats**

Furthering our discussion of statistics and language, “truth” and scepticism, let us note that whereas words cannot be fixed statistics famously can. This is not to say that words cannot be manipulated, they cannot be “fixed” in either a neutral or “ethical” sense—iterability and interpretation will not allow it. The fact that statistics can be fixed is due to their suturing effects resulting from the barrenness of numbers (the surface effect) and the ways in which statistics partake in the fluctuation between the promise of the constative and absolute scepticism. Let us see how farcical things have become within English schooling.

In England the situation has intensified as regards statistical imperatives. Earlier this year, schools were told that that 30 per cent of students must achieve 5 C grades or more including English and Mathematics. This process goes by the name of the “National Challenge”. In keeping with media friendly heroic sloganeering, this sounds like a jolly game show in which people from all round the country may participate via their television sets and mobile phones. “Failing” schools (many of whom do not possess cohorts that are even predicted to meet this target) must find a way to boost

their statistics and take on the “National Challenge”. There are a number of ways of doing this that I am familiar with.

Given the fact that English and Maths are primary requirements in reaching the magic number, schools can fill up the timetable with a greater number of English and Maths lessons. Then, if one lacks a sufficient number of teachers to deliver these lessons (there is such a great demand for English and Mathematics teachers that “failing” schools” can often not attract enough of them) take non-specialist teachers (skilled in “behaviour management”) from “non-essential” areas such as Physical Education or History to teach English and Maths. Such teachers will at least be able to ensure that something gets taught. Consequently supply teachers can cover the non-essential subject areas. Of course such subject areas can potentially all but disappear. This takes us on to ways of fixing the stats. There are numerous vocational courses that schools now offer which are equivalent to GCSEs in terms of their statistical value. So for example rather doing a GCSE in French, one might do an NVQ in business French. Everybody knows such courses are easier for children to do well in. They are often dominated by coursework activities that can be repeated until decent grades are achieved. Consequently failing schools are dismantling the framework of a traditional liberal education to gain value on statistics. In some schools, lower achieving students are being “prevented” from taking GCSEs in virtually all subjects bar Maths and English.

What goes on in “failing” schools also takes place in “successful” schools, but to a lesser extent and therefore a less explicit way. Schools that soar above the 30 % 5 A-C target will still have weaker students who will take courses equivalent to GCSEs. Though nobody says as much, “successful” schools will often be those whose leaders are smart and savvy enough to play the system well. Such schools appear to be offering value to their clients and they help the government to play its part in a closed economy of exchange. It is in nobody’s interest (apart from the students and broader, wider aims of education) to bring close critical attention to the farcical nature of what is going on. The government need to show that standards are improving. Numbers, as long as one doesn’t consider what they relate to, can give this impression.

## Statistics and Slogans

Having considered the performative force of statistics let us refer back to one of the numbers mentioned earlier—6,000,000 (referring to Jews killed in the Holocaust). I have never seen this number (given the context/s it normally appears in) written in numerals. This might be due to the fact that the number is somewhat inexact. However, there seems to be something obscene about using numerals in this instance that goes beyond their relation to reality, something disgusting about the equation of numbers with such horror. One might even go further and say that writing 6,000,000 out in words sutures over the horror of the Holocaust and that there is something unethical about humanising it in this way. What I am trying to touch on here is that bleakness accompanies numbers/statistics, whether they appear as words or numerals.

This perhaps explains why policies designed to boost the stats are given names like “Every Child Matters” (a British invention) and “No child left behind”. Both these phrases have become slogans. “Every Child Matters” need not mean, (and from a humanist perspective should not mean) “every child must gain added value on their minimum target grade”. There is a sense in which the phrase “every child matters” in its internal linking carries a humanist quality to it. In contrast “no child left behind” has a rather more forced quality to it that shows up its sloganeering—the phrase is adapted from military imagery of leaving no man behind on the battlefield (though there is also perhaps a hint of Hansel and Gretel about it). In at least two respects, these slogans have a suturing effect in that (1) they hide what they are about and (2) they become mantras—they dissolve into the public body. However, importantly, slogans are more vulnerable than statistics even when (or perhaps particularly when) they are married to them. This is due to the iterability of language mentioned earlier—for a slogan to be a slogan it has to be repeated. It will draw on words that have a rich history. Consider the fact that both slogans include the word “child”. Much of the recent discourse in British schooling had abandoned this word due to its progressive connotations and replaced it with “student”. Policy makers and politicians were presumably unaware of this word’s origins: “A student, let us remember, is originally a lover (Latin, *studere*—to love)” (Standish, 2005, p. 60). What we are bearing witness to here is the aforementioned “iterability” of language.



I am going to tell a story to reinforce what is perhaps at stake here. I recently gave a lecture to teacher trainees on “behaviour for learning”. Prior to this lecture I was asked to refer to the “Every Child Matters” agenda, as Ofsted inspectors would check that the students had been repeatedly introduced to it. I did not feel too happy about this and grudgingly referred to it in passing. The “phrase” elicited a groan from an audience who are still quite new to sloganeering. Suddenly I found myself defending the notion that every child matters with a discussion of the fact that when many of the students come across a certain kind of “child” and that individual will bear little resemblance to the sorts of human being (civil, non-violent, articulate) that they will previously have encountered (many of the students are privately schooled Cambridge graduates), resisting the temptation to write that child off will require considerable mental and emotional strength. Putting things this way introduces the term “every child matters” into a context that is neither technical nor humanist (in any sentimental sense).

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I maintained that Derrida’s philosophy provides a limited challenge to the forces of performativity. During the course of the discussion I have tried to show that language cannot be constrained by context or the power of numbers. Statistics need words (words that is that are not numbers) to humanise them. Though, as we have seen, this often takes the rather inhuman form of the “slogan”, slogans like all uses of language will contain elements that are iterable, their past and future contexts belong to them. The suturing effects of the marriage of statistics and slogans will not prevent language from bleeding. This chapter celebrates such bleeding not in the name of humanism, but rather in the name of the “inhuman” other that may arrive at any time. Words show up in unexpected places all the time. When they show up they do so in unpredictable ways. To follow them where they can go might help to decongest the passages of education. In the next chapter we will look at the ways in which Derrida (and Austin’s) ideas find their way into a discussion of social difference and “otherness” conceived of in terms of race and gender.

## Chapter 4

# It's a Kind of Magic: Performativity and Social Difference

### Introduction

In the last chapter we looked at Derrida's philosophy of language and how his work on "differance", "iterability" and the "arrivant" pave the way for thinking differently about what an education might involve. In certain respects, this chapter provides a coda of sorts to its predecessor. I make this point because the discussion of social difference and otherness provided by the feminist philosopher and Queer Theorist Judith Butler (which is the central focus of this chapter) is deeply influenced by Derrida's work on language. As noted in the last chapter, Derrida argues that Austin fails to treat and account for the force of the locutionary aspect of language that accompanies the form of the words themselves:

Austin has not taken account of what—in the structure of *locution* (thus before any illocutory or perlocutory determination)—already entails that system of predicates I call *graphematic in general* and consequently blurs (*brouille*) all the oppositions which follow, oppositions whose pertinence, purity, and rigor Austin has successfully failed to establish. (Derrida, 1988, p. 14)

Derrida's point is that language is itself performative and exercises force in its own right. Austin's mistake is to move away from the "wordness" (the "graphematic" aspects) of language to concentrate on forces that work on language and are thought to be somehow exterior to it. This brings us to Judith Butler. In this citation from Butler, she acknowledges her debt to Derrida:

I originally took my clue on how to read the performativity of gender from Jacques Derrida's reading of Kafka's "Before the Law". There the one who waits for the law, sits before the door of the law, attributes a certain force to the law for which one waits. The anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which that authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object. I wondered whether we do not labor under a similar expectation concerning gender, that it operates as an interior essence that might be disclosed, an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalisation in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. (Butler, 1999, p. xiv—xv)<sup>19</sup>

I want to highlight several features of Butler's understanding of performativity. Firstly, she clearly establishes a connection between foundationalist approaches to knowledge and legality, therefore emphasising the problematic aspects of a tradition that makes truth claims coterminous with fixity. "Knowledge" as regards gender is shown to be the effect of a performance that she calls "conjunction", emphasising the magical aspects of a process that performs its own essence, which is then made external and originary. Finally, Butler argues that performativity is "not a singular act but a repetition and a ritual"; that performativity reinforces the conjunction through repeated

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<sup>19</sup> This quotation derives from a new introduction that is featured in a more recent Preface to *Gender Trouble*. The first edition of *Gender Trouble* was published in 1990.

performances. Just as Austin's performative is inextricably linked with institutional practices, so is Butler's performativity. However, Austin does not question the foundationalist principles that are being repeated and reinforced in the rituals that make up his total speech situations. For Butler, it is the constative that it is continuously being performed. It will be useful at this point to consider what is at stake in Butler's findings as regards questions of ethics.

Butler sees the "invocation" of performativity as very much an ethical matter. For Butler, language performs us; various discourses designate who and what we are. This understanding of performativity has an ethical dimension because it works against essentialistic or biologicistic performative discourses. Of course the biologisation of difference is no neutral phenomenon. The inscription of biological determinants into language, will invariably favour the dominant group—usually the white western male. Consequently, history is characterised by various discourses of superiority and inferiority, often hidden by a sugar coating of positive connotations—black people are good at music and sport, but are they fit for political office? Women are pretty and delicate, but do they have the stomach for business?

## **Bourdieu and Magical Symbolic Power**

What Butler describes here is very like what Bourdieu calls the performative magic of all acts of institution. Before developing this parallel it will be helpful to give some indication of Bourdieu's more general theories of practice. Bourdieu's approach to sociology represents an attempt to bypass oppositions that were (and to a large extent still are) dominant in the social sciences such as the distinctions between the individual and society, freedom and necessity. Here focus on the individual and freedom would characterise "subjectivism". To think in accordance with a subjectivist model is to buy into the possibility that we can gain immediate access to explanations of social phenomena through interviewing participants in the research. In contrast, objectivists will discount reports of immediate experience, seeing those reports as simply reflections of underlying social structures that cannot be fully apprehended by subjects.

Though Bourdieu has a clear preference for objectivism on the grounds that it departs from the naiveté of subjectivism and gives weight to underlying structures, he recognises at the same time that the social scientist is also a participant in social life who is inclined to draw upon everyday words and concepts in analysing the social world. The problem with objectivism is that it does not account for the actual actions of participants, but simply sees them as cogs in a machine, without acknowledging its own complicity in social life. This is what leads Bourdieu to his discussion of “habitus”. Habitus refers to sets of dispositions individuals acquire that incline them to behave in certain ways. Such dispositions are “inculcated, structured, durable, generative and transposable” (Thompson, 1991, p. 12). They are often “inculcated” in early childhood (think of table manners and utterances such as “Sit up straight”). These dispositions invariably reflect the social conditions (relating to class, ethnicity and gender) in which they were acquired. Dispositions are durable in that they reside in the body and are usually carried through life—we cannot *easily* modify them. Alongside this durability, dispositions are generative in the sense that they generate practices and ways of seeing that concur with conditions of existence that produce the habitus.

When individuals act in accordance with the habitus, they invariably do so in different settings, what Bourdieu calls “fields”. Consequently, we can say that the habitus is transposable in that particular dispositions are worked out in specific structured spaces/fields. Through this process, individuals acquire (or fail to acquire) capital. When Bourdieu speaks of capital he does not just mean material wealth but also “symbolic capital” (in the form of prestige) and cultural capital (for example, knowledge and skills). Certain kinds of capital can be transferred across fields—qualifications can be traded in for well-paid jobs. But Bourdieu argues that each field is always a site of potential struggle. Either the status quo is maintained or it is challenged. More than this: “the very existence and persistence of the game or field presupposes a total and unconditional ‘investment’, a practical and unquestioning belief in the game and its stakes.” (p. 15)

It should be noted that though all transactions are in one sense economic, they are not economic in the narrow sense. One can gain cultural capital but not necessarily convert it into material profit, although one may convert it, in a different way, into, say, prestige. So, for example, at a time when I would regularly visit friends in France, I

noted a shift in their behaviour toward me once I had left teaching and started work in the Education Faculty at Cambridge. It is hard to capture exactly what this was like—I am not saying that my friends became deferential exactly, but they certainly expressed a much greater interest in my professional life than they had done before. The fact that I was on a part-time temporary contract and earning considerably less than the average schoolteacher did not really seem to affect this. This example partly indicates a cultural difference—the kind of prestige bestowed on me in France was not matched by friends in England (sometimes there seems to be something very French about Bourdieu’s outlook).

For Bourdieu, human action is always “economic” though economic in the “material” sense. There is no such thing as disinterested activity. This is not a form of “game theory” as conscious action rarely comes into the picture: the habitus already accounts for the ways in which we are predisposed to follow certain paths. In adapting his theory to take on board linguistic issues Bourdieu points to a linguistic habitus and a linguistic market. The “linguistic habitus is a subset of the dispositions which comprise the habitus: it is that sub-set of dispositions acquired in the course of learning to speak in different contexts (the family, the peer group, the school, etc.)” (Thompson, 1991, p. 17). The linguistic habitus forms part of the bodily hexis. Bourdieu speaks of “articulatory style”, a term which captures how ways of moving the tongue become synonymous with gender and class identities. “Distinction” as well as relying on this bodily style is reproduced due to the fact that different speakers possess different amounts and types of linguistic capital that define their positions in the social space. It would seem that for Bourdieu, language (and the invisible symbolic power it generates) comes to act as an agent for stabilising the habitus. Words and the bodily hexis through which they are produced help to ensure that individuals are not forcibly coerced into conforming to societal norms. Physical force is transmogrified into symbolic form and relies, therefore, on the shared belief (even amongst those persecuted by it) in its naturalness. To see the products of symbolic force as “natural” is to misrecognise what is going on. Individuals have to recognise its legitimacy. In this respect, they are not entirely passive. But for Bourdieu this seems to be where hope lies. As the linguistic habitus is generative, it may not generate obedience.

It is worth considering Bourdieu's general approach to the philosophy of language and, more specifically, his interest in Austin. Bourdieu finds Austin's work on the performative utterance extremely interesting and revealing. He sees it as a starting point from a step away from idealisation within linguistic theory, what he calls "the models of correct usage and turns its back on the socio-cultural/historical conditions through which linguistic practices become dominant and legitimate.

Bourdieu is particularly critical of Saussurian linguistics which posits an abstract supposedly neutral system of signs cast in contradistinction to language in use and Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence. Like Habermas, whose views are discussed in Chapter 3, Bourdieu maintains that "actual" speakers possess a practical competence that enables them to produce correct utterances within the appropriate circumstances. Chomsky's notion of competence is not up to characterising the kinds of competence possessed by actual speakers. Austin on the other hand, begins to delve into this territory and Bourdieu treats him more sympathetically.

Bourdieu is particularly taken with Austin's example of performative utterances that are institutionally bound speech acts such as "I do" when said at a wedding. He seizes on the infelicity that occurs if an unqualified individual makes an utterance in circumstances that demand credentials. For Bourdieu, these examples show that there must always be an institution and institutional appropriateness that allow for such acts to be effective. As Thompson notes, "Bourdieu is using the term "institution" in a way that is very broad and very active" (Thompson, J.B., 1991, p. 8).

It is in any case institutional power that a speaker relies on to carry out a particular act. Not everybody is allowed to christen ships and marry people. For christening and marrying to happen, an institution must be in place. Though Bourdieu is impressed by Austin, he does not think that Austin and his followers (whose "achievements we described in Chapter 2) took full advantage of their discoveries. To put it bluntly, their approach was not, according to Bourdieu, sufficiently "sociological" (no surprise there!). Felicity conditions are "primarily social conditions" (p. 9). However, this fact

is elided (as Bourdieu sees it) by Austin and his followers in whose work this focus slips away from sociological factors to issues of a linguistic and logical nature. Because Austin does not address such factors directly his followers miss an opportunity as they end up focusing on the words themselves:

As soon as one treats language as an autonomous object . . . one is condemned to looking within words for the power of words, that is, looking for where it is not to be found. In fact, the illocutionary force of expressions cannot be found in the very words, in which that force is indicated, or better, represented—in both senses of the term. (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 107)

For Bourdieu, Austin does not highlight the importance of the force of institutional context, the force that enacts itself on language. The latter does not treat these phenomena as social facts in the way he might. Authority, as Bourdieu sees it, “usually” comes from the social institution, not the words themselves.

As noted earlier, Bourdieu’s critique of Chomsky chimes quite nicely with Habermas’s views on that thinker. Both Bourdieu and Habermas emphasise the pragmatic dimension of language, which goes unrecognised in Chomsky’s work. However, the *kinds* of contextual factors that Austin gestures toward and Bourdieu grasps with both hands are not treated by Habermas. Rather, Habermas “thinks that he has found in discourse itself—in the specifically linguistic substance of speech, as it were, the key to the efficacy of speech” (p. 109). This is, in some ways, fair criticism. Habermas maintains that when we speak we raise certain validity claims pertaining to truth, rightness and truthfulness. He does seem to think that noise-free communication is possible. In some ways Bourdieu’s response to Habermas is reminiscent of Lyotard’s. Bourdieu points to the ways in which Habermas’s model fails to account for the structuring apparatus of the habitus.<sup>20</sup>

Though Bourdieu emphasises the force of extra-linguistic factors, he nevertheless, in slightly contradictory mode, gives a nod to the force of the words themselves. This is

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<sup>20</sup> For Lyotard, the habitus can be characterised by performativity, whereas Bourdieu pictures it in relation to a more general understanding of gender and class difference.



perhaps the second dimension of magical performative power. That is not to say that there is a clear break between the force of such words and the institutional power that they reflect, nor does it take away the fact (as Bourdieu sees it) that the force of speech acts must depend on the institutional status of the speaker and the constraints that are imposed on their actions. Anyway, at this point it might be helpful to have a look at those words which take on magical performative power. Here, this power manifests itself through binary pairs established through naming:

The act of institution is an act of social magic that can create difference *ex nihilo*, or else (as is more often the case) by exploiting as it were pre-existing differences, like the biological differences between the sexes or, as in the case of the institution of an heir on the basis of primogeniture, the difference in age. In this sense, as with religion according to Durkheim, it is a “well-founded delusion”, a symbolic imposition but *cum fundamento in re*. The distinctions that are most efficacious socially are those which give the appearance of being based on objective differences. . . (pp. 119-120)

We will come back to what Bourdieu means by “giving the appearance of being based on objective differences”. For now, I simply want to float the question: at what point do they look like they give this appearance? Anyway, Bourdieu discusses the manifestation of performative magic by giving examples such as the competitive examination whereby the difference between the first person to pass and the last person to fail can completely alter the course of an individual’s life<sup>21</sup>: “The former will graduate from an elite institution like the Ecole Polytechnique and enjoy all the associated advantages and perks while the latter will become a nobody” (ibid.). This of course highlights the arbitrariness of magical performative power.

For Bourdieu, it would seem that this kind of magic is a determining force. He gives the example of an insult that becomes “a kind of curse (*sacer* also signifies cursed), which attempts to imprison its victim in an accusation which also depicts his destiny” (p.121). This determining force is, Bourdieu thinks, even truer of “an investiture or an

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<sup>21</sup> This is a very French example. The pass mark in many French examinations is determined by a quota.

act of naming” (ibid.). Here I take him to mean the named distinction between, say, man and woman) whereby the person “named” feels obliged to comply with his or her allocated status. This naming that generates a social destiny by “consecration or stigma” is “*fatal*—by which I mean mortal—because they enclose those whom they characterize within the limits that are assigned to them and that they are made to recognize” (p. 121). Nevertheless, Bourdieu indicates that there are sometimes “accidents” whereby individuals shake off the spell: “There are exceptions: the unworthy heir, the priest who abandons his calling, the nobleman who demeans himself and the bourgeois who turns common”. With that in mind Bourdieu notes that with all these examples “the sacred boundary remains clear” (ibid.). What he means by this is that the process of naming generates an economy of exchange whereby one can only negate the terms in which one is positioned by moving to the other side of the “boundary”. “Accidents” are caught up, Bourdieu claims, in an economy of exchange: we are positioned, or position ourselves (which is also to be positioned) on one side of the fence or the other.

So, to summarise Bourdieu’s position, it would seem that language, generally speaking, gains its force from extra-linguistic factors. The first dimension of symbolic language is that it acts as an aid that mysteriously pushes those factors into the background. The second dimension is represented by acts of naming that serve to naturalise dispositions within the habitus. Naming divides the world into hierarchical categories, and if people slip between these categories, this is some kind of accident: It is interesting that Bourdieu distinguishes here between the insult and the act of “naming”. It would seem that on occasions the two coincide (to say on occasions, is also to note the sorts of “difference” or “distinction” that tend to get swallowed up in Bourdieu’s writing).

Superficially, Bourdieu’s magical symbolic power looks very similar to Butler’s recognition of those acts of conjuration that, through repetition and reiteration, enforce social norms. Butler recognises that Bourdieu’s theory of habitus acknowledges the grip that dominant norms have on people. Indeed, Butler argues that practices that reiterate social norms are largely unreflexive and habitual. Also, they both try to steer clear of the structural interpellation that is argued for by thinkers such as Althusser. Both Butler and Bourdieu are committed to social and political intervention and to social transformation. For Bourdieu, political intervention is only possible due to the

generative nature of the habitus and its relative autonomy in regard to the various fields in which social action takes place. However, as discussed above, agency seems to be a kind of happy “accident”.

## **Will words do us in?**

Butler takes Bourdieu to task on several counts. Firstly, she notes that he conflates the power with of words with the power of social institutions—the magical effect for Bourdieu is the impression that words accomplish things, but in actual fact the force of words depends on institutions and speakers with positions of power within those institutions. The magic “only works when the words are spoken on the right occasion in the right manner by one who is authorised to speak them” (Lovell, 2003, p. 3). The problem for Butler is that Bourdieu maintains a distinction between the merely verbal and the social and argues that Bourdieu is simply recasting the Marxist model between base and superstructure (ibid.). Institutional norms provide the solid base for authoritative speech acts, but this would seem to be at the expense of human agency. It is hard to see how the habitus and social field are differentiated: “the rules or norms, explicit or tacit, that form that field and its grammar of action, are themselves *reproduced* at the level of *habitus* and hence implicated in the *habitus* from the start” (Butler, 1997, p. 117).

The problem with Bourdieu’s account, as Butler sees it, is the “partial” role that he ascribes to language and the distinctions between norms, words and bodies. As discussed above, Bourdieu acknowledges the ways in which the habitus becomes “embodied”. Norms come to reside in the body, but it would seem that this is divorced from linguistic concerns. Butler argues that speech acts are not “merely linguistic” and that Bourdieu “fails to grasp how what is bodily in speech resists and confounds the very norms by which it is regulated” (Butler, 1997, p. 142). What does this mean? I take it that Butler is following Derrida in his claim that “there is nothing beyond the text” (which I discussed in the previous chapter). What bodies are and how we come to know them and indeed what norms are, and how we come to know them is always mediated through language. It is always textual. The dissonance that may be developed between the words we speak and our bodily experience of them is textual. In the

introductory chapter I alluded to the queasiness I experienced on being inducted into the realm of educational language. This queasiness derives from earlier linguistic experiences, and a dissonance between present and previous linguistic encounters. Therefore, when I found myself, as one does, using that language (remember, this thesis is against sneering), it had a bodily effect.

It might be argued that the (Derridian) power of conjuration in Butler and Bourdieu's magical symbolic power work in opposite directions and reflect differing understandings of the role of context. The power of conjuration in Derrida and Butler involves language's concealment of its own linguisticity. For Bourdieu it is rather the reverse: words conceal norms. Bourdieu argues that Austin and his followers, including Habermas, focus too much on the words themselves. However, as we saw in the last chapter (and Butler's thinking is very much in line with this view), for Derrida, Austin puts too much weight on context understood in extra-linguistic terms. The same might be said of Habermas. Though his "validity claims" are clearly linguistic they are in a sense waiting for words—they are abstract pragmatic categories. For Derrida, context is not something that sits behind words but operates through them. Moreover, the reiteration of words means that they find themselves in unexpected places, doing unexpected things. If we do not acknowledge the graphematic quality of all communication, we can only be blind to this and trapped in Bourdieu's mutually sustaining habitus/field. What can arrive in the most ordinary exchanges will of course apply to the politics of gender race and class. While language can oppress us, it cannot exact absolute power.

In contrast to such discourses, the very possibility for change is inscribed in the performativity of language. In ways that are both negative and positive, language performs us as subjects; in its performative capacity, language can "do us in" (destroy us) just as it can "do" (that is, create).

This brings us back to Derrida's treatment of the question of iterability, which plays such an important part in Butler's analysis. Drawing on Derrida, she shows how the iterability of language means that the same words or forms of discourse can find themselves in all manner of contexts in which they may do damage or act creatively.

Consider, for example, the reappropriation of the words “nigger”<sup>22</sup> and “queer”. It is important that the wordness or graphematic quality of language is recognised. There is a decided danger in viewing language as doing rather than stating, thereby dissolving/deferring the linguistic aspect of language. Through the examples he gives, Austin clearly understands the legal character of the illocutionary utterance in which words stand in for actions. It is the fixity of the law as it applies to language that Butler finds most dangerous:

Those who seek to fix with certainty the links between certain speech acts and their injurious effects will surely lament the open temporality of the speech act. That no speech act *has* to perform injury as its effect means that no simple elaboration of speech acts will provide a standard by which the injuries of speech might be effectively adjudicated. Such a loosening between act and injury, however, opens up the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back that would be foreclosed by the tightening of that link. Thus the gap that separates the speech act from its future effects has its auspicious implications: it begins a theory of linguistic agency that provides an alternative to the relentless search for remedy. (Butler, 1997, p. 15)

When talking about legal remedy, Butler is referring to the adoption of speech act theory by the legal profession and how this comes to be applied to cases involving race and pornography. Mackinnon argues that pornography should be regarded as performative and that it has an illocutionary force; the backdrop to this scenario is of course the constitutional debate over what counts as freedom of speech (Butler, 1997, p. 22). From the legal perspective offered by Mackinnon, the illocutionary force of pornography makes it a kind of doing as opposed to a kind of speaking: the element of speech is usurped by the force of doing. Butler argues that what this fails to take into account is the performative function of the law as it prescribes and gives constative value to definitional control over pornography. Effectively, the very force that is being criticised by Mackinnon is itself being enacted by the law. Butler is not arguing that

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<sup>22</sup> It has become customary (particularly within black American popular culture) for black people to refer to themselves and to each other as “niggers”. Such instances reflect a kind of talking back as regards the language of oppression.

pornography is not performative, but she is deeply sceptical of the discursive force that is being applied to the illocutionary utterance. Her argument takes its most vivid form when she writes about those members of the armed forces who declare their homosexuality. In these cases, the declaration of homosexuality is treated as a homosexual act. Discursive adherence to the illocutionary utterance has clearly led to the adoption of some very strange positions.

## **An education in difference**

Perhaps the goal of education should be the obliteration of difference—schooling could partake in the ungendering and deracialising of society. I recall a paper given several years ago discussing the role of education in creating an ungendered society. The speaker was working on the assumption that “gender” is a kind of social construction that is in no way “essentially” linked to a person’s sex. We might therefore work towards the creation of a society that dispensed with the disabling construction of gender (which tends to favour men) and ultimately succeed in that goal. What made the subsequent discussion so interesting was that nobody disagreed with the notion that gender was unrelated to biology. However, by the same token, none of the participants believed that the ungendering of society was feasible. At one stage somebody introduced the question of colour—what would such a society look like? Of course, we may dress baby girls in blue and boys in pink, thereby reversing the common western trend, yet we have not ungendered society: the norm still both haunts and allows for the reversal. At one point, a participant suggested that in trying to imagine a gendered society everything appeared white, yet quickly realised that white had connotations with virginity which, for example, could be observed in the traditional bridal dress. Ultimately, the group concluded that an ungendered society was not simply an impractical goal, but was in fact “unimaginable”. However, that is not to say that anybody felt that the fact that such a society was unimaginable meant that gender norms should be left unquestioned.

To try to ungender and to deracialise society is effectively to try to stand outside language, and this is impossible. It also suggests a lack of attentiveness to the sensitivities of the situation. What is perhaps badly needed, however, is some kind of

negotiation with the ways in which language performs us and recognition of the wider consequences this has for schooling. If, for example, we see racism as in some ways inscribed in the language, and if we recognise that we cannot stand outside it but are inevitably implicated in performances that reinforce gender or racial stereotypes, this can engender a more modest form of critique than the kind of cleansing discussed above.

We are, however, still left with the question of how schools should handle these issues. To illustrate the relevance of Butler's account of performativity to educational matters, it may be helpful to consider an educational scene that illustrates what is at stake. Let us imagine a situation—in fact, not too far removed from my own experience—where an in-service education session on the subject of racism is being given to a group of teachers. The scene takes place in a poorer part of a run-down town, somewhere in the north of England.

*A speaker has been brought in, as a result of a legal obligation, to give a presentation on dealing with racism. He begins by explaining some fairly recent changes in the law that have resulted from a report on the Steven Lawrence case. This is followed by a series of definitions that prescribe what ethnicity, race, racism and racist behaviour mean. The manner of delivery involves the speaker questioning the audience as to what they think racism is, followed by the right answer; the answer that is defined by law. Both questions and answers appear in a PowerPoint presentation; the latter magically appear to create the effect of a moment of illumination. Once the staff has been fully briefed on various definitions the speaker moves on to the various things teachers should “do” about racism. This involves two notable forms of behaviour on their part. Firstly, the teachers discover that it is a legal requirement that they officially record every instance of racism if it conforms to the legal definition of that term. Secondly, they are encouraged not to punish the perpetrator of the offence—not to punish them for what they have said—but to discuss the issue with them.*

As Butler and Derrida argue, the ethical dimension of performativity is tied up with iterability; we are not controlled or constructed by language in any absolute sense. Therefore, the legal context ascribed to racist behaviour in above scene will not limit the possible contexts within which the discussion can take place. Consequently, it is

possible to imagine a very different approach to racial issues that acknowledged the difficult and undecidable aspects of racism. Rather than making the assumption that certain behaviour must always and all times be offensive in accordance to a given model, we might ask questions about how offensive behaviour works. Perhaps most significantly, we might introduce activities that demonstrate the performativity of race. There is of course, the famous example of the “blue eyes, brown eyes” experiment during which the teacher discriminated against her students (who were all white) on the grounds of eye colour. This not only allowed the students to experience the direct effects of prejudice but also demonstrated the foundationless performativity of race.

### **Discourses of otherness in schooling**

Now, we might say that Butler’s discussion of the performativity of gender reveals the otherness internal to our words in the sense that femininity or blackness comes to represent whatever masculinity or blackness is not. Here, let me rehearse (and embellish) some of the points made in the previous chapter. We might say that whatever whiteness “is” is dependant on blackness. Blackness is “internal” to whiteness. This represents one dimension of difference and what Derrida refers to as the madness of language—all words are hunted/haunted by other words internal to their very possibility of meaning anything. The other dimension of difference can only be accounted for if we move beyond a synchronic picture of language to a diachronic picture of language in use. As Derrida notes, for words to mean anything at all they have to be repeatable and repeated, iterable and reiterated; they have to be *used* and used over time.

We have already seen how the iterability within language makes words other to themselves. Indeed we have also considered the ways in which language produces the effects of metaphysical presence that serves to mask the otherness internal to language. Part of this linguistic operation involves the production of conceptual difference—concepts take on the appearance of separate, different entities that exist in the ether (in the abstract). Of course, as both Derrida and Butler show, not only does this effect of difference establish identities; it also establishes a hierarchy of identity reflective of power relations within society/language. However, the disorder/otherness internal to



language that accompanies its iterability, in undermining the effects of presence, allows for the emergence of the *arrivant*.<sup>23</sup> Words are not under our direct control and can take us somewhere else.

We can see an example of this in Edward Said's use of the term "Orientalism". The Orientalist believes that he is studying the "Orient" in some sort of objective fashion that treats it as though it were an "inert fact of nature". In contrast to the Orientalist, Said begins with the assumption that the Orient is "not merely *there* just as the Occident is not just *there* either" (Said, 1986, p. 4). He argues that:

Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying "us" as against all "those" non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness. (p. 7)

Said shows how the Western distinction between Orient and Occident represents the construction of differences at a distance. He shows how the Orientalist, believing that he is engaged in a descriptive activity, contributes to the performance of difference. What the Orientalist fails to see is that the differences produced by difference are differences internal to the creation of the discourse of the West—what the Orient "is" is what the Occident is not. The very production of a narrative of Westernness or Occidentalism requires the performative conjuration of the Orient. We can see this trend in the binaristic thinking that characterises Enlightenment humanism. Enlightenment humanism conjures a realm of inhuman unenlightened culture as though such a thing were simply *there*. However, the very notion of the "human" is necessarily divided and "other" to itself.

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<sup>23</sup> This is a French word that is used in English, and it refers to someone who has newly arrived, probably unexpectedly, perhaps with a suggestion of ghostly presence.

Let us consider what has happened to the word “Orientalism” itself: its iterability. It is clearly inaccurate to say that Said’s way of thinking about Orientalism simply reflects the polysemy of language: it is not the case when Said uses the term that it reflects some other meaning in relation to some other context or set of objects. Rather, the reiteration of “Orientalism” reflects how Orientalism’s understanding of itself as a descriptive discipline shows it to be other to itself. We should also note that this understanding of Orientalism, which shows itself as other to itself, is not something that has simply been invented. Rather (it was waiting in the wings to “arrive” and show itself in this way as one of the future meanings of the term). The kind of deconstruction pertinent to the speech/writing distinction also applies to the supposed difference between the Occident and the Orient. The deconstruction of the Occident/Orient binary allows for the arrival of a new understanding of Orientalism. It should be noted that Said does not “deconstruct” the opposition—this is not something that the reader or writer is in control of. It is something they bear witness to.

## **Orientalism within the Curriculum**

In British schooling, the Orientalist approach to other cultures finds its crudest manifestation in the treatment of culture in terms of food, dress, customs etc. However, it takes a more complex form in relatively recent attempts to “accommodate” writing in English from other cultures into the curriculum. In some respects, we might see this as a form of progress, representative, as it is, of an attempt to accommodate difference and handle a cultural realm that was previously excluded. However, the limitations of such a well-intentioned “inclusive approach” can be noted in the National Curriculum for English in the distinction between courses of study based on an “English Literary Heritage” and on “Texts from different cultures and Traditions”:

### **English Literary Heritage**

#### **2 Pupils should be taught**

- a. how and why texts have been influential and significant [for example, the influence of Greek myths, the Authorised version of the Bible, The Arthurian legends]

- b. the characteristics of texts that are considered to be of high quality
- c. the appeal and importance of these texts over time.

Texts from different cultures and traditions

3 Pupils should be taught:

- a. to understand the values and assumptions in the texts
- b. the significance of the subject matter and the language
- c. the distinctive qualities of literature from different traditions
- d. how familiar themes are explored in different cultural contexts [for example, how childhood is portrayed, references to oral or folk traditions]
- e. to make connections and comparisons between texts from different cultures. (National Curriculum for English, 2003)

One can easily see how the Orientalist conception of other cultures makes itself known in this document. Works from the English Literary Heritage must be “influential”, “significant” and “high quality”. None of these factors play any part in the criteria for teaching texts from different cultures and traditions, and their absence speaks volumes. The word “qualities” does appear but it is used in a “descriptive” rather than “evaluative” context. It is made clear to the reader that two different forms of study apply to texts from the English literary Heritage and texts from different cultures and traditions. As regards the former, the approach to such texts would resemble traditional forms of literary criticism, whilst the latter seems to combine anthropology with linguistics: “pupils should be taught the significance of the subject matter and the language”. The English literary Heritage is influenced by “myths” and “legends” which find their meagre infantilised equivalent in “oral” or “folk” traditions—the reference to the “portrayal of childhood” is telling.

What is perhaps most significant about this distinction between an English Literary Heritage and texts from other cultures and traditions is that it assumes some kind of absolute distinction between these two categories. This assumption fails to acknowledge the fact that so much writing in English from cultures beyond the geographical borders of Britain is a direct response to the English Literary Heritage and

the Orientalist discourse that so often runs through it. If the conventions of the English language are reconfigured in these writings, then the assumption that this is merely a local expression of dialect to be analysed is both naïve and insulting. Instead we might see such texts as a means of writing back to a language/culture imposed through colonisation, giving words and structure a new resonance that does not simply repeat or reiterate the colonising power of older structures.

The final insult to writing from other cultures manifests itself in the placing of the Poems From Other Cultures section within the GCSE exam.<sup>24</sup> The English GCSE is currently split into language and literature. It is no coincidence that the marks generated from this section contribute to the English language section of the paper.

## Conclusion

We began this chapter by considering the ways in which language can exact a “magical” performative force that comes to shape our understanding of difference. Though there are clear similarities between Butler’s account of performativity and Bourdieu’s magical symbolic power, Butler accounts for language’s inherent flexibility and the creative dimension of our words. This dimension opens up rich possibilities for the teaching of difference in the classroom.

In the last part of the chapter, we considered curricular issues pertaining to difference and otherness. It is important to reiterate the point that many teachers and educationalists will see the inclusion of texts from other cultures and traditions within the curriculum as a progressive move. Equally, a progressive enthusiasm accompanies the various pedagogical strategies designed to accommodate difference. To see the injustice implicated in the binary distinction between a literary heritage and texts from other cultures, we must embrace the “mad” or perverse workings of language, its difference to itself, its iterability. Of course, we would have no means of talking/writing about anything at all if it were not for the effects of presence—to imagine a language without such effects is to imagine linguistic chaos. To imagine

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<sup>24</sup> Students in England and Wales take their GCSE exams (General Certificate of Secondary Education) at the age of 16.

linguistic chaos is to think from the perspective of linguistic “order”, itself an effect of language.

As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Butler’s discussion of performativity represents a coda of sorts to Chapter 3 and Derrida’s reading of Austin. This reading focuses on the locutionary aspect of the utterance. The next chapter will take a different tack. There we will consider Cavell’s treatment of the utterance’s perlocutionary aspect and consider its “ethical” implications for education.

## Chapter 5

# Passionate Utterance and Moral Education

### Introduction

At various points during the last few chapters I have treated the tone of different parts of the thesis as something worthy of thematisation. What I have tried bring out when discussing the formal make-up of the thesis, is the way in which different voices open up or foreclose on various ways of seeing the world. I have therefore thematised “voice”. This is not meant as a nod and a wink to postmodern cleverness. Rather, I aim to show how different visions of language bring into focus different values and different senses of what “ethics” might involve. Therefore, allusions to Lyotard’s depiction of the Cashinahua tribe, Williams’s drowning wife, the arrivant that waits at the door, the iterability that forbids closure (even closure of the most liberal kind), show the ways of speaking (or should I say “writing”) the ethical that take us beyond the narrow linguistic parameters of managerial speak and the discourse of performativity. In Chapter 1, I argued that the ordinary language analytic philosophy that follows in the wake of Austin misses the importance of voice texture and tone of his prose. Those philosophers take his work too “seriously” (perhaps logocentrically) as nothing more than an argument to be built on or refuted. In this chapter, I look at

Cavell's close reading of Austin in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow*. I try to show how Cavell's discussion of "passionate utterance" exposes problems with both the language of performativity and the epistemic treatment of moral issues found in the work of Michael Hand (a leading figure in analytic philosophy of education). I argue that Cavell captures something of the expressive nature of speech that is missing in both the performative apparatus of schooling and the analytic treatment of moral issues.

## Crisis

In the chapter "Performative and Passionate Utterance", which appears in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow*, Stanley Cavell makes a claim for what he describes as the expressive or passional aspects of speech. This claim ("plea" might be a more appropriate term) is, in part, a response to what Cavell regards as a missed opportunity or failing in Austin's theory of the performative utterance, an opportunity that, Cavell argues, philosophers seem unwilling to take up. To get a grip on what is at stake here, it will be helpful to follow Cavell along the path that leads to his identification of this missed opportunity. This path begins with a crisis.

The crisis, which for Cavell marks Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, derives from the latter's "failure" to make a clear distinction between the *constative* and *performative* utterances. I have already discussed this at length in Chapter 1. However, the reader might appreciate the restatement of these ideas given that Chapter 1 might seem like a long time ago. Also, the emphasis here is slightly different. Anyway, the crisis identified by Cavell can be found in Austin's initial recognition that there are utterances that are not nonsense and cannot be thought of in terms of truth and falsity. Such utterances include "I christen this ship the . . .", "I now declare you man and wife" and "I promise". Austin calls such sentences performative utterances and notes that to utter such sentences is

not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. None of the utterances cited is either true or false: I assert this as obvious and do not argue it.

It needs argument no more than “damn” is not true or false: it may be that the utterance “serves to inform you”—but that is quite different...When I say, before the registrar or altar, etc., “I do”, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it (Austin, 1976, p. 6).

By focusing on the kind of utterance that “does” something, Austin brings attention to an area of language that had been previously ignored by philosophers. When stating that performative utterances do not describe anything, he is clearly trying to show the limitations of the descriptive theory of language. Implied in the notion of the description or statement, is the implication of a distance between language and world, between words and actions, whereas the example of “I do” (said at a wedding) allows no such division—to speak is to act, to indulge. In making this point Austin introduces the binary distinction between performatives and constatives. Constative utterances state things and can be considered in terms of truth and falsity. Having made this distinction, Austin focuses on the performative utterance and is obliged to consider the “constraints or conditions that they operate under which ensure that they communicate or do their work as perfectly as they do, as perfectly as the most unobjectionable true-or-false statements do theirs (Cavell, 2005, p. 158). As we saw in Chapter 1, Austin calls such constraints felicity conditions and identifies six of them:

- (A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,
- (A2) The particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.
- (B1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and
- (B2) completely.
- (Γ1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further



(T2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently (Austin, 1976, pp. 14-15).

Following his account of the different kinds of infelicity, Austin makes a hesitant entrance into an area, which marks a dramatic about turn in his thinking on the distinction between the constative and the performative. Here is Austin:

Lastly, we may ask—and here I must let some of my cats on the table—does the notion of infelicity apply to utterances, which are *statements*? So far we have produced the infelicity as characteristic of the *performative* utterance, which was “defined” (if we can call it so much), mainly by contrast with the supposedly familiar “statement” (p. 20).

What Austin recognises is that to state something is to do something and, by the same token, truth conditions also apply to performative utterances. It is Austin’s inability to separate the constative from the performative utterance in a clear fashion that marked the critical reception to Austin’s findings. This “failure” was treated as a “flaw” or “aporia” in Austin’s project. Cavell is to some extent being playful when he maintains that he does not so much “wish to deny these descriptions as to insist that this critical juncture also represents a signal victory for Austin, for what it shows is that performatives bear the same ineluctable connection with, assessment by, fact, with and by what is the case that statements do” (Cavell, 2005, p. 168). This “failure” is at the expense of a far more dramatic “victory” as it exposes the messiness of the relationship in which different kinds of utterance fail to sit comfortably within “constative” and “performative” categories.

Having enacted this “revolution” on philosophy, which recognises the performative aspect of statements, Austin “reluctantly” gives up on the binary distinction between constatives and performatives, and moves on to a ternary distinction that analyses the performative utterance in more detail. Here, the performative utterance is considered in terms of the locutionary aspect (the form of the words), the illocutionary force (what is done with words) and the perlocutionary effect (what is done by words). Those who take Austin’s inability to separate the constative from the performative utterance as a

failure may simply see this as a new philosophical direction or beginning bred out of frustration. In contrast, as we have already noted, Cavell sees this inability to make a clear distinction as a “victory” of sorts. For Cavell, the “failure” as such, derives from Austin’s elaboration of this ternary distinction, an elaboration that brings about what Cavell (cautiously) refers to as the catastrophe in the latter’s theorising.

## Catastrophe

Austin argues that every performative utterance must necessarily be a locution and possess illocutionary force. Illocutionary verbs represent the explicit form of the performative utterance. “I christen this . . .” and “I now declare . . .” are illocutions. The illocutionary force of such verbs derives from what is done “in” saying something. Illocutions and their illocutionary force are given a considerable amount of attention by Austin—at one point he even counts illocutionary verbs. However, in contrast, Austin is hesitant when it comes to dealing with the perlocutionary effect of the utterance. For Cavell this hesitancy takes on catastrophic dimensions when Austin claims that: “Clearly *any*, or almost any, perlocutionary act is liable to be brought off, in sufficiently special circumstances, by the issuing, with or without calculation, of any utterance whatsoever . . . (Austin, 1976, p. 110). In light of Austin’s typical rigour, Cavell wonders why the former should make such a bold and unsupported claim. To begin with, considering the importance of felicity conditions in establishing the happiness of a performative utterance it would seem extremely peculiar to conclude that there are no happy or unhappy effects of an utterance. By the same token, can an individual really be held responsible for “any” effect, which their utterance brings off? Here is Cavell considering the possible effects of saying “it would be scrumptious to hear you sing”:

There is no end to the things that happen to people. If you begin to cry upon hearing my words, I might think I had bumped against a sore point, that perhaps I had not heard that something had happened to your voice. But for someone to say that I did it, that the tears were (the effect of) what I did by saying what I did, seems not merely unfair in this case (as Austin describes accusations that would set aside excuses in

physical [literal?] cases of doing something untoward); paranoia has shown its hand (Cavell, 2005, p. 179).

Although, any effect may follow on from my utterance, it is important to note, that I will not necessarily be responsible for that effect. For Cavell, the marginal importance or external nature that Austin allocates to the perlocutionary effect clashes with the importance of responsibility, which marks the latter's treatment of moral issues. This is particularly noticeable when we consider Austin's account of promising in which "the use of metaphysical or other false profundities to avoid one's ordinary commitments . . . is noted early in *How To Do Things With Words* as the ulterior philosophical vice or temptation that the theory of performative utterances is most explicitly interested to combat" (p. 176). Let us unpack this a bit. Cavell's point is that Austin's claim (when discussing promising) that my word is my bond reflects a moral commitment that seems to be lacking from his approach to perlocutions. Surely, coming to know what the probable effects of what I say will be is part of my moral development. To say that anything might happen, as the result of my speaking, is to renege on my responsibility for what I say. This explains why Cavell draws an analogy between Austin's distaste for perlocutions and Stevenson's infamous emotivist claim that "Any statement about any matter of fact that any speaker considers likely to alter attitudes may be adduced as a reason for or against an ethical judgement" (Cavell, 2005, p. 174). The implications of this analogy are that, despite having brought the importance of moral issues to the philosophy of language to light, Austin has relapsed into a caginess that resembles the distaste for moral issues found in the work of the emotivists.

Despite his concern with Austin's argument surrounding perlocutions, Cavell is not content to let a much loved teacher simply stew in his own contradictions, but attempts to find explanations for Austin's dismissive attitude. The more subtle explanation, in typical Cavellian fashion, is not stated explicitly. The reference to Stevenson suggests that despite the revolutionary aspects of his treatment of the performative utterance, Austin is unable to escape the dominance of Ayer and Stevenson's thought and open himself up to the messiness of the effects of performativity. With this in mind, we can see that there is a conventional aspect to the illocutionary/performative utterance that provides a safety net for Austin's argument.

One of the reasons which Cavell cites for Austin's relative uninterest in perlocutions derives from the latter's adherence to convention. When we make a performative utterance, there is no denying that we have "done" something. We can then adhere to a set of conventions (felicity conditions) to decide whether or not the utterance is happy. In the case of perlocutions, the matter is much more complicated. We may make a list of perlocutionary verbs—frighten, anger, frustrate etc. However, whereas we can speak of illocutionary/performative utterances and know that we have identified something, does it actually make sense to speak of perlocutionary utterances at all? Cavell takes pains to point out that, whereas we can say "I christen you" or "I marry you", and will have done something, we cannot say "I frighten you" or "I interest you" and necessarily have said anything at all; these sentences do not appear in English in this form (p. 171).

Cavell focuses on the fact (which Austin also mentions) that "performative" or "illocutionary" utterances take the form of the first person singular present indicative active. Perlocutions do not fit in with this schema, because for the sentence "I frighten you" to be happy, I would have to be exercising some kind of magical power over you.<sup>25</sup> The fact that perlocutionary "utterances" do not exist/make sense in English (in this form) is what seems to mark the end of the matter for Austin (he does not have a sufficiently exact structure to work with), and this, for Cavell is the catastrophe in his theorising. In contrast Cavell argues that this lack of a structure, rather than closing everything down, opens up a new field of enquiry that moves beyond formal constraints and presents an approach to speech that engages with the other.<sup>26</sup> This is because, whether or not my words (which may appear in all manner of forms), succeed in frightening you depends not just on the words I use to try and bring this effect off, but also (and this is crucial) on how "you" respond to them. This explains why although the sentence "I frighten you" makes no sense, the utterance "I frightened you, didn't I" with its disclaimer works perfectly well. Consequently, taking seriously the importance of the perlocutionary effects of language is to acknowledge the individual/expressive uses of speech in which people establish relationships with one

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<sup>25</sup> Cavell indicates that Austin's suspicions regarding perlocutions partly stem from the latter's distaste for political rhetoric, which partakes in the insincerity against which his philosophy rails.

<sup>26</sup> This "other" is used quite innocently here—as simply a partner in the conversation. Although Cavell's recognition of the other in speech may lead to parallels with the work of writers such as Levinas, there is no space to engage with such issues here (for a discussion, see Standish, 2007).

another. Here, the conventional aspects of speech (which have not gone away—the utterances I use to frighten or alarm will not be randomly chosen) but are dissimulated through its unpredictable, unconventional aspect. We cannot simply depend on a rule (as with illocutions) as individual characteristics come into play, pertaining to both the speaker and receiver of the utterance. Cavell notes that “Not everyone is capable of frightening, or seducing, or alarming other people. The skill or talent to perform these acts is not equally distributed amongst the species” (p. 173).

We might say that Cavell is interested in the perlocutionary aspects of language precisely because they are unconventional. He shows that thinking about language in these terms make room for imagination and virtuosity, that consequently, there is no “one size fits all” (ibid.) criterion at work here: In the next section we will consider how Cavell’s treatment of the perlocutionary effects of language leads to his usage of the term “passionate utterance”.

### **What is a “passionate utterance”?**

We have seen that by entering into the realm of the perlocutionary effects of language, there is no “conventional form” that can be identified. Consequently, we may expect to find that whatever a passionate utterance is, it cannot be “defined” in the same way as a performative. It is therefore unsurprising that Cavell will not, at any point, try to “define” the passionate or expressive utterance—to do so would miss the point. This, however, does not close down the discussion of passionate utterance. For example, we are told that passionate utterances do not exhaust the field of the perlocutionary (p. 177).

What might this mean? The significance of this claim becomes clearer when we consider Cavell’s example of a judge who utters the words “you were wrong” to a defendant. Such an utterance cannot be considered “passionate” or expressive because illocutionary force dominates—it can amount to a sentence. Of course, such an utterance will have perlocutionary effects, but we are dealing with a different kind of perlocutionary field. Cavell argues that what the judge is doing does not amount to an “ordinary exchange”. The word ordinary “exchange” is clearly heavily loaded here.

That Cavell wishes to occlude the judge's verdict from the field of "exchanges" is very telling. A study of the passionate utterance (and perlocutions generally) involves the recognition of the individual, which becomes distorted (perhaps sidelined) in the case of illocutionary force. I say distorted rather than negated in compliance with Cavell's point that illocutions do not silence the other. Rather they signal the end of the matter; the convicted criminal may protest against the verdict, but this is hardly an exchange, as we may "ordinarily" understand that term. Passionate utterances, as such, require "exchange not mediation or arbitration" (ibid.). Consequently, let us say that "You were wrong" could exemplify a passionate utterance, but only under different circumstances. Cavell provides examples of passionate utterances. Here are three of his examples:

- a) "I'm bored."
- b) "You know he took what you said as a promise." (Roughly a rebuke from Margaret Schlegel to Mr. Wilcox in *Howard's End*. I cite this to invoke and further contextualize the examples of moral encounter in my *Claim of Reason* (pp. 265-267).)
- c) "They say I (or perhaps I; or: I would not wish to) anger, mortify, charm, affront, encourage, disappoint, embarrass, confuse, alarm, offend, deter, hinder, seduce, intimidate, humiliate, harass, incite, etc. you."

We might note that all these examples partake in a form of exchange in which the speaker is responding to the words/behaviour of another person or persons—is in the midst of a linguistic exchange. We might also note that what these utterances mean (or do?) precisely is of course neither determined by the structure of the utterance, nor by simply what is said in the utterance. Cavell chooses "I'm bored" because it is one of Ayer's examples that the latter uses to argue for "the primacy of expression over emotion" (p. 178). Ayer claims that such expressions do not necessarily involve assertions at all (which serves to back up his claim that they are not the stuff of serious philosophical business). Cavell, doesn't deny that expressions do not necessarily involve assertions, but makes the point that: "If not to 'involve assertions' or words in your expression means to keep silent, this may come from being silenced, from not wanting to say something" (p. 179). Here, Cavell is making philosophy work with the

situations in which words are uttered (a very Austinian move, and quite deliberately so). Expressions, which are not necessarily verbalised, are (sometimes) not verbalised due to the force of convention and this force can stultify speech. Such a reigning in of speech is clearly a moral issue—Cavell is trying to show how the silencing that accompanies such force can exert a hostile and sometimes degrading form of power when it silences those who are victims of it.

The example “I’m bored” and the various ways in which this “expression” might be silenced has an obvious bearing on what happens in classrooms. We will say more about this later, but undoubtedly, a certain illocutionary force will invariably accompany utterances made by teachers. As we shall see, how a teacher deals with this, says much about the kinds of exchange that are necessary in the development of a moral education.

As with “I’m bored”, Cavell’s second example—“You know he took what you said as a promise”—is interesting for several reasons. First, like “I’m bored”, it represents a “challenge” to another speaker and it is the kind of utterance that may be both difficult to say and hear. As mentioned earlier, promising plays an important role in the association Austin makes between the performative aspect of language and his vision of morality as free from metaphysical get-out clauses. Indeed, promising has a certain special status as a performative utterance in the sense that its unhappiness cannot derive from the speaker lacking the appropriate authority or other kinds of infelicity of a similar nature. If you make a promise then you have made a promise, no matter what. However, things are only as clear cut as this if promising takes the conventional form of the utterance “I promise”, yet there are all sorts of ways of doing something that may or may not amount to promising that do not take on board this form. On such very ordinary occasions we cannot rely on a formula to account for what has been “done”. Instead what is required is a form of difficult exchange embodied in utterances such as “You know he took what you said as a promise”. Indeed, all Cavell’s examples of passionate utterance represent a form of negotiation with another speaker that involves saying something difficult that amounts to a challenge. We might also note, as Cavell does, that in all the examples, the issue of truth raises its head. Is it true that whoever is bored “is” bored—probably, but then “I’m bored” is often the reflex response of

teenagers when asked almost anything. Is it true that the character in the second example made a promise?

To elaborate on this issue of truth we should note that Cavell's second example of passionate utterance—"You know he took what you said as a promise", first appeared in *The Claim of Reason*. The fact that Cavell signals this up displays a rather roundabout and oblique form of footnoting. Shortly before displaying the quotation from *Howard's End* in *The Claim of Reason* Cavell writes:

The moral significance of how an action is described, the problem in saying what it is which is under scrutiny, suggests that the epistemological "foundation" so often sought for morality, the "knowledge" which is to "base" our moral conduct and judgement, is a knowledge of persons, an epistemology which explains and assesses our claims to know what anyone is doing, and the basis on which one describes one's own action (Cavell, 1979, p. 265).

Now, we might say, that here, Cavell is performing the very Austinian task of bringing philosophy's obsession with truth down to size. Epistemological concerns (narrowly conceived) qualify as only one aspect of a moral judgement. Cavell demonstrates what he means by looking at "strictly" epistemological contexts. The example he uses refers to the question of whether or not it is a goldfinch that has fallen from the tree. He mentions how, for example, simply noting that the bird has a red head means that the argument that it is a goldfinch is insufficiently supported. If, during this encounter, I say: "But that's not enough" there is no room for you to say: "For me it is enough". However, in moral cases "What is enough" is "itself part of the content of the argument". Consequently, "what is enough" "must be determined by me". Also, what I cannot do, if I wish to "maintain my position as morally competent, is to deny the relevance of your doubts" (p. 267).

Basically, Cavell is extending the scope of epistemology to include the specifics of the individual/other (as an individual) rather than treating these figures as external concerns. We might say that the account of passionate utterance helps to justify and reinforce this idea. The question of whether or not a promise was truly made depends



on where the participants of the conversation stand *vis-à-vis* what counts as a promise. When we consider an example such as “you may feel that I harassed (etc.) you”, in a sense this may be true—“you” may feel it to be the case, but you may not. The very asking of this question and its response represents a form of discourse in which people work out where they stand in relation to one another—truth is involved, but it is only one aspect of a moral judgement.<sup>27</sup>

Although we can see how truth still has its role (though minor) to play in considerations of the passionate/expressive aspects of speech, we should perhaps consider what has happened to performance in Cavell’s account. Has Austin’s theory been debunked? We might approach this question by considering Cavell’s most explicit application of Austinian methods to deal with the “missed opportunity” that marks *How To Do Things with Words*. I am referring here, to the moment in which Cavell constructs his own set of felicity conditions for perlocutions (Cavell, 2005, pp. 180-182). When presenting his new set of conditions, Cavell also includes Austin’s conditions relating to success of the “performative” utterance, so as to demonstrate how they deconstruct under the duress of the expressive/passionate/ utterance. This involves showing how an adherence to convention is undermined if one highlights the avoidance of conformity necessary for a happy perlocution:

*Austin’s Illocutionary Condition 1:* There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect . . . to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.

*Analogous Perlocutionary Condition 1:* There is no accepted conventional procedure and effect. The speaker is on his or her own to create the desired effect (p. 180).

On first inspection, this looks like a simple overturning/negation of convention in favour of the expressive aspects of speech; the perlocutionary conditions appear to be defying convention, rather than submitting to it. However, as Mulhall explains, there is

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<sup>27</sup> Also note that “I harassed you” requires “disclaiming functions” due to the difficulties mentioned earlier regarding the first person pronoun, which again demonstrates the importance of exchange over convention when it comes to perlocutionary verbs.

a decided danger in treating the passionate utterance as simply the negation of the performative utterance. He argues that when Cavell recognises that “my idea of passionate utterance turns out to be a concern with performance after all”, he

wishes his idea of passion internally to modify Austin’s idea of the performative, to subject it to internal transformation. His goal is not to counterbalance the idea of order with that of disorder, but to suggest that Austin’s idea of the dimension of law in which speech necessarily participates must be one that makes room for—makes possible—the ways in which speech allows us to improvise our way through the disorders of desire (Mulhall, 2006, p. 5).

Cavell is not trying to show that we can escape the conventions of speech (the law). For a start, the deconstructive dimension of his new set of felicity conditions requires the old conditions, which may be destabilised, but are not negated. What does this amount to? Well, if we go back to the example of passionate utterance: “He took what you said as a promise”, illocutionary force is still in play—these words may produce perlocutionary effects. However, the conventional form of the utterance cannot determine what has been done in speaking. By the same token, the force of what it means to make a promise has not been lost, but modified in accordance with the recognition that promising need not take a conventional form, yet the force of promising is still there in the appeal of the speaker. Consequently, Cavell is not casting the performative utterance aside, but simply introducing the disorders of desire to go beyond what Austin can bring himself to say.

This sense of going beyond is marked by Cavell’s last condition for perlocutions, in which he registers “a final asymmetry”<sup>28</sup> with Austin’s conditions, and adds one of his own:

Perloc 7: You may contest my invitation to exchange, at any or all of the points marked by the list of conditions for the successful

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<sup>28</sup> Cavell notes that for Illocutionary Conditions 2a and b (3 and 4 in Cavell’s numbering system) there are no analogous perlocutionary acts.

perlocutionary act, for example, deny that I have that standing with you, or question my consciousness of my passion, or dismiss the demand for the kind of response I seek, or ask to postpone it, or worse. I may or may not have further means of response. (We may understand such exchanges as instances of, or attempts at, moral education) (Cavell, 2005, p. 183).

Here, Cavell is obviously, in one sense, “extending” Austin’s contribution by refiguring the total speech act situation so that it is resistant to closure (in the case of passionate utterance at any rate). As noted in Cavell’s aforementioned approach to moral issues in *The Claim of Reason*, the possibility for “exchange” is part of the content of the utterance. Issues pertaining to truth or epistemological “reasons” make up only one facet of the situation, and the same can be said for performance. Otherwise, we negate the possibility for “improvisation in the disorders of desire”. Moral education, as such, necessarily involves the constant possibility of exchange and cannot be impoverished by an “absolute” (following Mulhall) appeal to convention, which one might assume, would result in the “moralism” that accompanies “instruction” and inhibit “instances of, or attempts at, moral education”.

## **A Passionate Response to Hand**

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Cavell’s philosophy throws up issues concerning expression that are both relevant to analytic approaches to ethics and what is ethically coded through the language of performativity. The urge to write this chapter derives, in part, from listening to Michael Hand’s paper “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?” at the Gregynog Philosophy of Education Conference in 2006.<sup>29</sup> Hand begins his paper by arguing that there are two options open to educators when they “tackle” moral questions in the classroom:

One is to provide pupils with substantive moral guidance, to teach moral questions with a view to promoting particular answers to those questions. The other is to teach moral questions as controversial issues,

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<sup>29</sup> This paper has since been published in *Theory and Research in Education*, and it is to the published version that reference is now made.

to make a deliberate attempt *not* to steer pupils towards particular answers but rather to be as even-handed as possible in the presentation of conflicting views (Hand, 2007, p. 69).

Hand calls these *directive* and *non-directive* approaches to teaching moral questions. The question his paper asks is whether or not homosexuality is an issue that demands the promotion of particular answers to questions (the directive approach) or whether it is sufficiently “controversial” as to merit the presentation of different views on the matter (the non-directive approach). It should be noted that Hand makes it very clear that when he is talking about homosexuality, he is referring to homosexual acts.

The first part of Hand’s paper looks at the different theories that deal with the criterion for establishing controversiality. Ultimately, he discards most of these approaches and settles on Robert Dearden’s “epistemic criterion”. Here is Dearden:

a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason. By “reason” here is not meant something timeless and unhistorical but the body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures which at any given time has been so far developed (Dearden, in Hand, 2007, p. 71).

By adopting Dearden’s approach, Hand attempts to discover rational arguments for treating homosexuality as a controversial issue. He considers a number of moral objections to homosexuality and shows (in my view, quite legitimately) that the various positions under scrutiny present arguments that are “contrary to reason”. Hand eventually concludes that homosexuality should not be taught as a controversial issue.

Following the reading of this paper at the conference, I recall having had feelings of acute frustration at my inability to articulate successfully my problems with what Hand was trying to do. Some writers may wish to take Hand to task for his choice of Dearden’s model of controversiality (Hand presents enough conflicting models of controversiality to make this seem plausible), whilst others may find inconsistencies in his argument. However, neither of these argumentative routes touches on what seems

to me to be problematic about the paper. At the time, I knew that my frustration did not derive from the quality of the argument exactly, but rather from the mode of argumentation employed and the specific limitations imposed by it. The devil was, therefore, not so much in the details of the argument as in its adherence to a particular kind of discourse. Consequently, this paper's aim is not to provide a critique of Hand that attempts to refute his arguments, but to find a language (which houses a mode of thinking) that brings critical attention to the kind of moral philosophising on education instanced by "Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?". It will, I hope, become clear that Stanley Cavell's treatment of the role of passion in speech takes us some way down this road. Cavell wishes to raise "the question of philosophy's tendency, notable in my experience particularly within the tradition of analytical philosophy, to discount the role of passion in human life, as if that discounting might be a step toward a welcome reduction of it" (Cavell, 2005 p. 156). What I want to consider, following Cavell, is whether or not the role of passion and the expressive aspects of speech have a role to play in moral education and whether or not a certain kind of rationalistic thinking occludes something important.

Without wanting to let too many cats out of the bag, we might note that homosexuality is certainly a passionate issue in schools (and society at large), if not a controversial one. It is too early in the paper to elaborate on this point—the groundwork for that has not yet been provided. Perhaps philosophers are right to occlude passion from their thinking. It may, however, be interesting to let a couple of questions hover over the forthcoming text. First, why think of homosexuality purely in terms of homosexual acts? Second, can we adequately deal with moral issues by deciding whether or not they are controversial? In the last part of this chapter these questions will be reintroduced, but this follows a discussion of Stanley Cavell's treatment of performative and passionate utterances.

The reader may find the inclusion of Hand's paper in this article rather strange given the discussion of Cavell's passionate utterance presented above. For a start, both Cavell's (and of course Austin's) treatment of moral issues takes place against the backdrop of the emotivist theory of language that considers moral questions as separate from epistemological truth questions. In this sense, Hand, by introducing Dearden's epistemic criterion when approaching homosexuality, takes a completely opposite

approach—evaluating moral judgements in terms of epistemological factors is apparently his “only” method. Of course, the similarity between both approaches (and this is important) is that epistemological factors are the governing concern.

I want to briefly restate the point that in employing, what I take to be, Cavellian tactics, the intention is not to contradict Hand, or attempt to refute his argument, but rather to consider the implications, which derive from his particular approach and the limitations that it imposes. Invoking Cavell’s treatment of the passionate utterance, I will attempt to show that in a complicated (unconventional?) way, Hand’s paper partakes in a form of moralism (Hand’s paper is not moralistic in a conventional sense), which Cavell is trying to counter.

Let us begin by considering the philosophical limitations of what Hand sets out to do. As I said at the beginning of the article, it is not that I disagree with Hand’s findings (as they are developed within his chosen parameters), but it is rather his “epistemological” approach, which engenders some consternation. Before introducing the question of passion, I should point out that I am not suggesting that epistemological factors (including the kind that Hand deals with) should be excluded from the picture, but rather that Hand’s interest in “truth” is itself rather limited. It is perhaps telling that, when discussing homosexuality, Hand refers to homosexual “acts” as though such things merely represented brute empirically observable facts<sup>30</sup>. His reason for adopting this particular approach perhaps represents the kind of skittishness toward language that Austin displays toward perlocutions—both areas are rather messy. But, to what extent does it make sense to talk of homosexual acts as though they were somehow free of linguistic considerations? Are we to think of copulation between homosexuals (or heterosexuals) as simply instances of particular kinds of animal rutting? To think in this way is to ignore the realm of significance that situates different kinds of sexual act and, following Judith Butler, the various “performances” that constitute gender. To ignore this (and here we have a truth claim) is to ignore the most

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that Hand provides a justification for treating homosexuality in terms of acts. However, this simply involves distinguishing them from “preferences, inclinations or orientations” which people cannot be held responsible for (Hand, 2007, p. 85). It is interesting for the purposes of this chapter that Hand should distinguish “acts” from the preferences, inclinations and orientations implicit to them.

important dimension of what homosexuality “is” and here controversiality enters the picture—what “sexuality” “is” is controversial.

Even if we take the suggestion that sexuality is bound up in complex linguistic issues, and in doing so introduce the history of homophobic discourse, genetic arguments etc., into the classroom this will still miss something about what a moral education involves. In a sense it is also to advocate the overly cerebral pedagogy that is implied by Hand’s argument. This quality is apparent when Hand speaks of the two ways of tackling moral issues in the classroom—steering and not-steering. The options (only two?) open to us, seem to have little to do with anything that begins in or emerges from the classroom. Rather, they relate to a decision making process that precedes entry into the classroom and provides guidance for what teachers do. In a climate, currently obsessed with student-centred pedagogies, Hand’s binary distinction governing the possibilities for teaching moral education, may seem slightly anachronistic to modern practitioners. Looked at from this (student-centred) perspective, both the directive and non-directive approaches belong to the same camp because the emphasis is on what the “teacher” “does”—either steering or not-steering. Similarly, a debate surrounding socio-linguistic issues may present similar formal restrictions. Although Hand’s argument bypasses issues of language, whereas the socio-linguistic approach does not, both miss something important about language.

We go some way to seeing what this missing element is by recognising that in British schools (and I daresay, elsewhere) issues pertaining to homosexuality are, for many students, the most passionate. Homosexuality constantly raises its head in the form of homophobic abuse and bullying. This is not necessarily directed at gay students, but often at emotionally weak students as a means of exercising power over them. Now, whether or not Cavell would be willing to accept some of the comments made by students in this respect as passionate utterances is clearly contentious. This is because Cavell draws a distinction between hate speech and passionate utterance, maintaining that they are different forms of perlocution.<sup>3132</sup> However, there is no denying the

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<sup>32</sup> In “Performative and Passionate Utterance”, Cavell is keen to save Austin from certain readings of his work that assimilate the performative to “hate speech”. Some feminist writers maintain that linguistic instances of hate speech successfully “do” something in a manner that is analogous to the

expressive aspects of “hate speech”. Also, from my teaching experience, I can think of many occasions in which students have passionately expressed their irritation with homophobic language.

If we take the expressive quality of this kind of utterance seriously, we come to see that it is not enough to coldly recognise that moral issues are bound up with language. It is also important to consider the ways in which they make themselves known in “worldly” utterances. Antonio Negri, in discussing Wittgenstein, may help us here:

With Wittgenstein there was an extraordinary rediscovery of a phenomenology of passions within language. . . With Wittgenstein, language becomes the condition of the mind, its very form. He introduced us to an analysis of language in which it is not the philosophical questioning that counts, but rather the linguistic form of the question, the intonation of the voice, all the bodily elements of language that are now seen to be central (Negri, 2004 pp. 173-174).

With this conception of the world (also shared by Cavell) in which language is viewed as the condition of the mind (which is bodily in a different sense to the brain), philosophy conceived of in terms of controversiality (particularly when this is limited to giving reasons) cannot be the governing concern when handling moral issues. By focusing solely on epistemological questions, only one dimension of the moral life is accounted for at the expense of the performative/passionate aspects of that life. Whether something is controversial or not depends on assessing things in the cold light of reason, yet homosexuality is not a “cold” issue—in some countries it is sufficiently “hot” that its practice merits the death penalty.

We can perhaps now see that a moral education needs to account for the lived, bodily, linguistic experiences of the moral life. What I want to suggest, is that Hand’s argument seems to tacitly imply that teachers should stifle those “ordinary exchanges” that can become “instances of, or attempts at, moral education”. This is so because the expressive qualities that may characterise the kinds of utterance that the teacher fields,

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performative utterance. Cavell makes it clear that examples of “hate speech” are perlocutions, not illocutions.



will be stymied and redirected by the downward force of the cold blade of reason. In wielding such an impersonal weapon, as a teacher, I ignore the expressive aspects of language and must therefore “deny that I claim any particular standing with you in order to confront you, and my utterance may therefore claim authority to speak for a particular institution, with its own ordinances, or for morality as such, and risk moralism” (Cavell, 2005, p. 182). The kind of pedagogy that we may read off Hand’s argument entails that the responsibility to the individual as an individual and the other (as an individual other) is not permitted to enter the picture. Consequently, Hand’s argument must therefore be, in one sense, moralistic because it has no place for the expressive in speech. Here is Cavell:

But if what I have been aiming at is indeed some fragment of a view of expression, of recognizing language as everywhere revealing desire—. . . this is meant in service of something I want from moral theory, namely a systematic recognition of speech as confrontation, as demanding as owed, . . . each instance of which directs and risks, if not costs blood (p. 187).

Earlier in this paper, I alluded to the element of risk that characterised Cavell’s passionate utterance that involves freedom to say what it is difficult to say—to be confrontational when necessary—to say what one has to say. This is ultimately the crucial factor that Hand’s argument cannot take in. Instead, he provides a bloodless anaemic take on morality, which abstracts and severs it from worldly exchanges. The epistemological account he offers fails to consider how language and exchange are at the heart of our moral lives.

This discussion can be illuminated by a consideration of the distinction Cavell draws between the impersonal metaphysical voice of modern philosophy (Hand would only represent the impersonal aspect of this voice) and ordinary language philosophy. Paul Standish explains this as follows:

In contrast to the impersonal metaphysical voice of modern philosophy, which states or questions what is the case, ordinary language philosophy characteristically proceeds with expressions, as we saw, of

the form “When we say . . . , we mean . . .”. The verbal form here is first person, which authorises the judgement, and plural, which binds the speaker to the community. And this statement is made not as some kind of empirical generalisation; a survey of usage, for example, would be beside the point. It is made rather as something closer to a commitment or an expression of assent, depending both upon the sincerity of the speaker (how it seems *to her*) and on her affirming her alignment or community with others (her faith that she shares this judgement with *them*, can speak for them). In this, then, Cavell mitigates any tendency towards the “subliming” of rules by throwing emphasis on the location of rule-following practices in the hurly-burly of the form of life, the cohesion of which depends on agreement in judgements (Standish, 2004, p. 94).

As with his insistence on perlocutions, “voice” is important in Cavell’s approach to “assent”. Here, we might note a distinction between the forced consensus, which would derive from avoiding encounters that bring into question the legitimacy of moral judgements, and the “assent” that can be offered or withheld from negotiations that take place in “the hurly burly of the form of life”. If, in the teaching of moral education, we are to do justice to our students, then this “commitment, or an expression of assent” will not lead to chaos. Rather, it will represent the difficult task of promoting shared entry into a common world.

It is important to make it clear that despite the restricted vision that constitutes “Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue”, Hand’s arguments against those who find homosexuality morally questionable are rigorous and important—they may, and perhaps should, be infused into exchanges within the classroom. To deny epistemological factors any credibility is “not” the aim of this paper. Hand may claim that he is criticised for something that he is “not” trying to do, and in a sense this would be right. However, those areas that do “not” feature in Hand’s paper, whether they are epistemological or passionate, are too important to ignore. If such considerations are not infused into moral debate and confrontation within the classroom, then a shiver will be felt that does nobody any good.

## Performativity and Passion

Having considered the rather bloodless portrayal of the moral life in Hand's philosophy, let us now turn to the language of modern pedagogy and managerialism. Here, I want to introduce two sections from a chapter that features in *The Therapy of Education* (Smeyers, Smith and Standish, 2007), called "Self-esteem: The Inward Turn". This chapter shows how the promotion of self-esteem in the classroom (which is often uncritically celebrated as an obvious good) can lead to certain absurdities. Such absurdities derive in part from the deficit culture regarding the kinds of responsibility teachers take for their words. The first section from the chapter that I want to draw on relates to the current tendency in schools to avoid "punishing" children—it will (supposedly) damage their self-esteem. Instead, "consequences" have come to replace sanctions. If children are fully aware of the "consequences" of their actions then responsibility has been devolved. If a child misbehaves she is not "being punished". Rather, she is effectively punishing herself. The example, Smeyers *et al.* paraphrase (and criticise) is taken from Canter and Canter's book *Assertive Discipline* (Canter and Canter, 1992):

Carl is told that poking someone means that "you will choose to sit by yourself at the table". Carl might reasonably respond that while he was told that this was to be the punishment he hardly wants to sit by himself, and hasn't *chosen* to. But there is no talk of punishment, because of course punishment would damage pupils' self-esteem (Smeyers et al, 2007, p.16).

Smeyers *et al.* do not simply want to castigate this kind of classroom activity for its manipulation: "perhaps all teaching has an element of it" (*ibid.*). Rather what they see as objectionable is the disavowal of personal responsibility. The teacher in the example is unwilling to say the kind of thing that risks blood (or rather reveals something other than bloodlessness). The kinds of exchange that Cavell refers to are stymied. This example resonates with the meeting described in the introductory chapter of this thesis between Sharon and Albert. Being a professional nowadays can lead to a curious

detachment from one's words. Smeyers *et al.* provide a rather beautiful example of this kind of detachment when a family visit a school that prioritises self-esteem:

Consider Hannah, who was six years old when her parents were inspecting possible schools for her in their suburb of Boston, Massachusetts. They were initially impressed with one which foregrounded the building of self-esteem among its aims. As she showed Hannah and her parents around the school the Principal drew attention to the various arrangements that were meant to embody this philosophy: no competitive sport, plenty of Circle Time for children to listen respectfully as their peers talk about their feelings, an emphasis on praise for good behaviour rather than blame for bad. Hearing the phrase used so often, Hannah asked, "What's self-esteem?" "It means we *love* you Hannah", the Principal replied. "No you don't", Hannah burst out. "Mummy and Daddy love me, and grandma and granddad, *but you don't even know me*". (p. 11)

That Hannah should be the one to identify the absurdity of the principal's comments is telling. She has yet to be dragged into the technologies of learning that may impact on her ability to display the kind of "voice" we see here. Of course the teacher's intentions are good. It is not my aim to castigate or sneer at the Principal (though cringing is perhaps unavoidable). However, we might wonder what have things come to when "love" can be treated so lightly, so mechanically.

## Conclusion

Though I do not want to draw an exact analogy between Hand's approach to moral issues and the language of contemporary schooling, they both seem to have "something missing". The teachers who behave in ways analogous to the actors in Smeyers *et al.*'s examples will perhaps go home and lead rich passionate lives. The fact that professional life so often occludes richness and passion is something that educationists might "rage" against. At the very least we might learn to laugh at ourselves when we are at our most ridiculous.

## Chapter 6

### Dionysos, Intensity and Rhizomes

In the last chapter, we discussed the ways in which certain approaches to teaching and learning can lead to linguistic detachment and a denial of responsibility. Also, through the discussion of the expressive aspects of speech, we touched on the linguistic forces that accompany our utterances. To think in terms of the force of our words is of course very much part of Austin's project, through his discussion of illocutionary force and what is done by words. However, it is also very Nietzschean. Without approaching it directly, I hinted at what might be involved here in Chapters 1 and 5. Austin's style (and the force that accompanies that style), suggest that he is doing more than simply constructing an argument. The jokes about christening ships "Stalin", the endless lists that will never resolve things suggest that there is clearly something of the "gay science" going on in Austin. Indeed, Nietzsche's interest in developing a "gay science" is in part a response to the "Socratism" that characterises so much philosophy. Socratism here signifies the belief that philosophers hold that dialectic will eventually lead to the source of truths that concern us. For Nietzsche such truths are always historical. They have no metaphysical foundation. As we have seen already, Austin is equally suspicious of metaphysical pretensions and is also concerned, to paraphrase Cavell, with bringing philosophy's concern with truth down to size.

In this chapter, we will consider the ways in which a Nietzschean approach to education helps to counter the "force" of performativity, by looking at that philosopher's distinction between Apollo and Dionysos and also by considering

Nietzscheans Deleuze and Guattari's three images of thought: the tree, the fascicular root and the rhizome. In contradistinction to the previous chapters, the discussion of education will be interspersed with philosophy in most of the sections. The reasons for this will hopefully become clear.

## **Apollo and Dionysos**

In *Education in an Age of Nihilism*, Blake, Smith, Smeyers and Standish adopt a Nietzschean critique of contemporary educational values and in so doing argue that the technological understanding of being which characterises contemporary education simply treats questions pertaining to value in terms of the opposition between success and failure.

This kind of nihilism manifests itself in the artificialities comprised in skills-based approaches to teaching and learning. Blake *et al.* show the unnaturalness that accompanies talk of things such as “emotional skills” and demonstrate how this mode of thought inhibits the development of “intense learning experiences”. Here, the figure of Dionysos, the Greek God of sensual abandon and intense experience, enters the picture. Blake *et al.* discuss the distinction between Dionysos and Apollo, the sun God of order and reason. Following Nietzsche, they are neither advocating the abandonment of reason in “a free-for-all” pedagogy nor maintaining that the current vogue surrounding the development of cognitive skills represents a triumph of the Apollonian spirit. Rather:

There is no suggestion here that anything goes. It is dissimulation that harbours difference within identity, passion within reason, chance even within structured composition. It suggests a way for our thought and action, and so possibilities for our teaching and learning. (Blake et al, 2000, p. 114)

The dissimulation of Apollo and Dionysos is what is required. The obsession with cognitive skills and structured learning represents an impoverished mechanical version of reason, oblivious to the spirit of the dance. Knowledge is not something that can be

isolated from the ways of gaining it. Moreover, as Deleuze shows in his reading of the role “forces” play in Nietzsche, “We will never find the sense of something . . . if we do not know the force which appropriates the thing, which exploits it, which takes possession of the or is expressed in it. A phenomenon is not an appearance or even an apparition but a sign, a symptom which finds its meaning in an existing force” (Deleuze, 2005, p. 3). Consequently, we cannot simply speak of different ways of learning the same thing, but must consider how that thing becomes this or that in accordance with the way in which it is apprehended. Lessons that manipulate and aim to foster “skills” do not leave their object untouched. With characteristic humour, Blake *et al.* capture what is, generally speaking, at stake here:

But beware the numerous false dancers here . . . enthusiastic facilitators and earnest enablers, transferrers of skills and critical thinkers, motivators and school improvers, progressives in various guises, beware find-the-learning-style-that-suits-you-best, the onanism of learning-to-learn. . . Beware: as-a- teacher-you-must-plan-your-lessons, you must state clearly the aims of the lesson, specify the learning outcomes, list the resources you will use, describe the method you will use, you must keep the class moving so that the children’s attention doesn’t wander, you must not stray from your plan, and so, with this careful planning, and with the inspection that ensures you are fully accountable, what is taught and what is learned become channelled to predetermined ends. These are highly realistic counterfeits of education. (p. 117)

Here, Blake *et al.* show how the nihilistic forces of modern pedagogy generate a form of intensity that presents a hollowed out, debased version of the Dionysian. There is intensity all right, but it is of a counterfeit kind, a disturbing, if impotent libidinal drive. I take the repetition of the term “beware” to be a humorous take on Nietzsche’s theatrical style. However, the notion of fear is an important one in the current environment of schooling and is a complex issue. As Blake *et al.* note in an earlier part of their book, thinking in terms of the classroom “skills” can act as a shield against the kind of close connection with students that may engender a greater chance of rejection. Of course, this is a very different kind of fear from what is reproduced by and within

the system. This other kind of fear is perpetuated by skills or technique-oriented thinking. The flipside of the confidence generated by my array of skills is the fear that if I use them and things don't work out, then I am clearly some sort of failure. The children who do not respond in the correct way can appear monstrous. Indeed, the nihilistic distinction between success and failure produces and reproduces a closed economy of fear. When things do work out, this may build confidence, but what if something goes wrong tomorrow? To experience the alleviation of fear is to continue to partake in the culture of fear. The performative apparatus is the very thing that produced the fear in the first place.

I want to make an analogy between the solutions and smoking. Smokers sometimes believe that they need cigarettes to alleviate stress. Of course, it is their addiction to cigarettes that makes them stressed when they lack access to the evil weed; there is scientific evidence to suggest that smoking increases stress levels. Public broadcasts in the 1980s used to feature a stooped Dickensian cartoon figure called Nicotine who, fag in hand, would attempt to lure teenagers into adopting a smoking habit. But just as they are about to spark up, Superman appears, makes a speech and drags Nicotine away. The teaching and learning gurus would perhaps like to think of themselves as Supermen leading teachers down the right track: the sanctimonious way in which many such figures reveal their magic tricks can certainly sound like a Superman speech. However, what if they, like Nicotine, are addicted to their wares and are simply providing teachers with a quick fix? In so doing, they cultivate the culture of fear.

This perpetuation of a closed economy of fear explains why we should “beware” the various attractions presented by Blake *et al.* To be wary of enthusiastic facilitators etc is not to escape fear, but to submit our selves to an “open” economy of fear. To enrich this discussion let us now consider the three images of thought discussed by Deleuze and Guattari in their extraordinary book *A Thousand Plateaus*.

## Tree-Like Thought

Describing tree-like thought is fairly straightforward. Here we have (1) the image of roots, often invisible to the naked eye—think of God or Hegel's conception of spirit,



and (2) the firm insular trunk from which branches spread. A tree (as image) is a self-enclosed entity, an arborescent phallogocentric “structure”. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that the law of the tree-like structure always follows the logic of the one that becomes two. Here we might think of Genesis, and the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib. In this sense “the tree is already the image of the world, or the root the image of the world-tree” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 5). The law of the “One that becomes two” is effectively also the law of reflection. The book is projected as the reflection of the world. There is therefore a matching of thought and world in representation. Within this model, thought is not conceived as an active element in the world.

To understand what this means in relation to education, we have only to look at the Humboldtian conception of the university. Following Fichte and Schleiermacher, Von Humboldt argued that the goal for higher education was the “spiritual and moral training of the nation, which could be achieved by “deriving everything from an original principle, by “relating everything to an ideal” (justice), and by “unifying this principle and this ideal in a single idea”—the state. As a consequence: “The end product would be a fully legitimated subject of knowledge and society—each mind an analogously organised mini-State morally unified in the supermind of the State” (Massumi in Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. xii).

With the breakdown of grand narratives, the unifying ideal espoused by Von Humboldt is replaced by another unifying principle—that of performativity as diagnosed by Lyotard. As we saw in Chapter 2, Lyotard argues that the grand narratives of modernity have been replaced by the logic of effectiveness. We have already seen how this works in regard to schooling. To guarantee success, the family tree of the school is organised in accordance with a structure of line managers who attempt to ensure that teachers are delivering lessons in the correct ways. Earlier we noted that in the Humboldtian vision of higher education the individual subject becomes equated and inextricably linked to the root manifested in the figure of the State. Similarly (though this is a more impoverished vision) the individual subject in the contemporary comprehensive school is one with their target grade. The emphasis on teaching the “individual” comes to mean little more than maximising a student’s “potential”, or “output”. It should be noted that, in the case of performativity, although the root of

Enlightenment reason has been broken, an equally powerful arborescent structure has grown out of the remains.

## **The Fascicular Root**

Having considered the tree-like structure of the contemporary school, in which the relative autonomy once enjoyed by teachers has been replaced by the trunk of extreme accountability (a structure reinforced in each individual lesson), let us turn to Deleuze and Guattari's second image of thought, the fascicular root:

The radicle system, or fascicular root, is the second figure of the book, to which our modernity plays willing allegiance. This time, the principal root has aborted, or its tip has been destroyed; an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots grafts onto it and undergoes a flourishing development. This time, natural reality is what aborts the principal root, but the root's unity subsists as past, as yet to come, as possible. We must ask if reflexive, spiritual reality does not compensate for this state of things by demanding an even more comprehensive secret unity, or a more extensive totality. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 5-6)

Deleuze and Guattari refer to fascicular thought (or the fascicular book) as "modern". I think they are referring to poems like T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The structure of *The Wasteland* appears to resemble a multiplicity. Different voices appear and disappear. Different languages ancient and modern are thrown together. The book presents an image of a degraded, splintered, "multiple" world" in which the root of classical fullness and beauty has been aborted—its tip has been destroyed: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish?" (Eliot, 1922). Consequently, *The Wasteland*, by longing for a moment at which the fragments of civilisation can be shored against their ruins, demonstrates the cyclical unity in which "fullness" can be regained when the future is reconciled with the past and the root is restored. This then represents a form of "unworldliness", a turning away from the world to a spiritual, higher or "secret unity" that cannot be found in the world, but may

be discovered by elite artistic intellects: “The world has lost its pivot: the subject cannot even dichotomise, but accedes to a higher unity, of ambivalence or overdetermination, in an always supplementary dimension to that of its object” (p. 6).

Deleuze and Guattari point out that despite projecting an image of multiplicity, the fascicular system does not really break with dualism, that: “unity is constantly thwarted in the object, while a new type of unity triumphs in the subject” (ibid.). This is due to the fact that the subject/writer/intellectual becomes one with the spiritual realm and therefore gains some sort of control over the world, by structuring and representing that world as chaotic. This is why Deleuze and Guattari argue that this attempt to represent the world, in which root-cosmos has been replaced by radicle chaosmos actually leads to an even higher sense of unity than is the case with tree-like thought.

### *A Fascicular Education*

Fascicular thought portrays a world which is multiple and chaotic. What might a fascicular education look like? We will consider what is at stake here through a discussion of a fictional educational scenario taken from Donna Tartt’s novel *The Secret History*.

### *The Secret History*

The narrator of *The Secret History*, having dropped out of medical school, goes to a small, prestigious American college to study English literature. In the early part of his first semester he attempts to gain credits for his degree by joining the tiny Classics department (at this point there are only five students) and finally gets accepted. The department is set aside from the rest of the university both geographically and in terms of how it functions. Over the course of the novel we come to understand that the Classics department only exists on the whim of its sole lecturer. The College tolerates/ignores the Classics department and its unusual practices due to the fact that Julian, a rich aesthete, makes donations to the college, and “refuses” to accept a salary. The aforementioned “unusual practices” include a process of selection that is almost as much based on personality as academic merit—four of the five students (Henry,

Charles, Camilla and Francis) are depicted as extremely clever, whereas Bunny adopts a persona that Julian finds “agreeable”. The methods of assessment are also shown to be eccentric in comparison with other departments in the College.

This small academic community which the narrator joins define themselves in opposition to what they perceive to be a degraded, debauched, uncivilised student community, obsessed with drugs and parties. They generate an insular society redolent of Evelyn Waugh novels—they do not read newspapers, or watch television. Instead they decamp to Francis’s family’s country estate where they row on the lake, read in the library and drink wine. At a fairly early stage in the novel, Julian gives a seminar on the Dionysiac ritual. Without including the narrator (who is new to the group), the other characters attempt to recreate the Dionysiac ritual at the country estate—they dress like Ancient Greeks, consume potions etc. However Bunny keeps ruining their attempts by farting or making jokes. He is subsequently excluded from these secret proceedings.

The characters finally “succeed” in enacting the ritual, but in the process they “accidentally” kill a local farmer. Bunny finds out about this and, without doing so explicitly, blackmails them. Eventually they let the narrator in on what has been going on, and together they plot Bunny’s murder before pushing him over the edge of a cliff. The final section of the novel is marked by the remorse the characters feel for what they’ve done. They are unable to transcend the morality of an age from which they have attempted to flee. Julian works out what has happened, and without giving the characters up to the police, leaves the university.

### **Julian’s lesson**

The description of the lesson on the Dionysiac ritual begins tellingly with the narrator’s apology for failing to accurately replicate Julian’s virtuoso performance: “He was a marvellous talker, a magical talker” (Tartt, 1993, p.38). Indeed the narrator berates himself for the fact that he cannot imitate the speech of a “superior” one. Julian begins with solipsism and the “burden of the self”—we are made miserable by our individual souls and desire to escape them. He rejects “love” as an antidote to this situation

because “one loses oneself for the sake of the other” and maintains that one can only truly lose oneself in “the joy of battle” (p. 39). Julian then jokes that with all their knowledge of battle tactics gleaned from his seminars, the students should be able to take Hampden town. He adds: “And how many years has it been since the gods have intervened in human wars? I expect Apollo and Athena Nike would come down to fight at your side, “invited or uninvited”, as the oracle at Delphi said to the Spartans. Imagine what heroes you’d be.”

Following this darkly humorous aside (we are told that some of the students seem to be taking the prospect of invading the town quite seriously), Julian moves onto the subject of beauty. He suggests that the most violent moments in Greek tragedies are also the most beautiful, that therefore: “Beauty is rarely soft or conciliatory. Quite the contrary. Genuine beauty is always quite alarming.” This segues into an account of the “Dionysiac ritual” in which “The revellers were apparently hurled back into a non-rational, pre-intellectual state, where the personality was replaced by something completely different—and by “different” I mean something to all appearances not mortal. Inhuman” (p. 42). Julian then queries whether or not the people present are so very different to the Greeks and Romans as they are also “obsessed with duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice? All those things which are to modern tastes so chilling” (p. 43). The narrator humorously notes that looking round the table at the expressions of his classmates: “to modern tastes they were somewhat chilling”. Anyway, Julian goes on to suggest that by adopting such values, intelligent and cultivated people will ignore the existence of the irrational. The Dionysiac ritual therefore acts as a therapeutic pressure release. Otherwise “those powerful old forces will mass and strengthen until they are violent enough to break free, more violent for the delay, often strong enough to sweep the will away entirely.” Referring to these destructive passions Julian concludes:

How glorious to release them in a single burst! To sing, to scream, to dance barefoot in the woods in the dead of night, with no more awareness of mortality than an animal! These are powerful mysteries. The bellowing of bulls. Springs of honey bubbling from the ground. If we are strong enough in our souls we can rip away the veil and look

that naked, terrible beauty right in the face: let God consume us devour  
us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn. (p. 45)

Is there not something “terribly” attractive about Julian’s lesson? The clear crescendo that builds up from the jokes about invading Hampden to the rapturous finale in which he envisions a freedom to sing and dance and bathe in all manner of sensuous pleasures, divorced from the mundanities of the self and its tawdry existence. Shouldn’t teaching be like this? Julian’s students are clearly transfixed: “We were all leaning forward, motionless. My mouth had fallen open; I was aware of every breath I took”. Indeed, Tarrt’s narrator is so moved by this experience (and I imagine that many readers, including myself are similarly moved by this passage) that we hear:

That night I wrote in my journal: “Trees are schizophrenic now and beginning to lose control, enraged with the shock of their fiery new colors. Someone—was it van Gogh?—said that orange is the color of insanity. Beauty is terror. We want to be devoured by it, to hide ourselves in that fire which refines us. (Ibid)

However, inevitably, the more troubling elements of this scene must be brought to the foreground. This can partly be observed in the clear elitist aspects of the discourse on view. The jokes about taking Hampden have a sinister resonance—there is a clear fascistic desire to make the plebs kneel before the superior race of classicists with their higher values of “duty, piety, loyalty and sacrifice”. This elitism obviously also echoes in the claim that the Dionysian experience is for “intelligent people”, who in their pursuit of reason violently repress urges, which are of no real significance to “lesser beings”. Although Julian appears to be championing affirmative delight and rapture this is all done in the service of negation. The self, which we despise in our solipsistic haze, must be overcome, must be negated if we are to become open to Dionysian pleasures. Consequently, we must destroy to build, and it is this that accounts for the violence, which for Julian is integral to terrible beauty. When Yeats writes that “A terrible beauty is born” (Yeats, 1965, p. 205), his sensitivity toward the oxymoronic force of revolutionary republican violence in Ireland is not diluted, as it (oxymoronic force) seems to be for Julian.

For Julian, the self is not lost but is present as negation. Trees are not schizophrenic in Julian's vision—the affirmative power, which might allow this to happen, is always being recouped by negative forces. That affirmative power had already been grounded in the very negation of the self, found in Julian's interpretation of the Dionysiac ritual. Despite the appearance of a multiplicity, and a loosening and escape from tree-like structures of reason and self-hood, the entire experience so it is presented here, ultimately resides at the root of "pure being". Indeed, we might say that during the encounter, Julian represents himself as being at one with pure Being. This grounding, which marks a return to a lost spiritual unity, epitomises the fascicular approach Deleuze and Guattari condemn as a false or deluded approach to multiplicity. Unity may have been aborted in the object but is returned to in the subject.

We might say that the disastrous and tragic events that follow on from Julian's lesson are tied up with the form of negation that haunts Julian's description of the Dionysiac ritual. Ultimately the characters are unable to escape the pressures of the moral universe that exerts its force on them. Their attempts at enacting Dionysiac rituals (it as if they were following a handbook), demonstrate how their denial of society is not an escape at all—tree-like thinking is not so easily avoided.

## **Rhizomes**

Having considered the implications of tree-like and fascicular thought, let us now consider the rhizome. For the purposes of clarity, the following descriptions of rhizomatic thought will be compared to tree-like thought. Whereas trees grow in accordance with an arborescent "structure", rhizomes do not behave in this way; they grow round the edges and between gaps and are always on the outside. Grass is a rhizome—here we might note the peculiar resistance to destruction displayed by grass. It may be obliterated in one place but simply grows up again elsewhere.

When looking at tree-like and fascicular thinking, we noted that, in the case of the former, subject and object are in a sense united—this is obviously the case when we consider the Humboldtian conception of higher education in which individuals become mini-states. In the case of the fascicular thought, the root is aborted and the

object/world is projected as multiple, yet unity is restored in the subject, who in their higher state of being, gains interpretative control over the chaos. In contrast, the very dichotomy between subject and object is displaced by the figure of the rhizome. Again we might think here of grass, or the ant colony, which Deleuze and Guattari describe as an animal rhizome. We tend not to think of grass in terms of its individual blades; by the same token, ants are not generally thought about in this way. Also, having no original starting point or end point, the rhizome lacks an established, fixed or stable identity—it is always in the process of “becoming”. Think of the forest rather than the tree, which goes where it can go and cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. Rhizomes are multiplicities. We cannot even speak coherently about “a rhizome”—we must simply refer to “some” of a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 9) as we might speak of a patch of grass, which is already multiple. Rhizomes are therefore “always in the middle”.

There is a decided danger of thinking of the tree and rhizome in terms of a binary opposition. The aforementioned images of tree and forest neatly exemplify how Deleuze and Guattari’s images problematise binary distinctions between separate entities. It might seem that whether we think in terms of the tree or the forest comes down to a simple question of perspective. However, there is more to the distinction than this. Deleuze and Guattari often use the terms “inside” and “outside”. This is not a metaphysical distinction, but one that emerges from tree-like thinking, which, in developing an internal structure, posits an outside and generates a metaphysics; binary distinctions are, in effect, the products of arborescent thought. Consequently, in defining an outside, tree-like thought creates boundaries and establishes limits; by constructing a sense of internal unity, tree-like thought must negate that which it is not. In contrast, as it is always on the outside (of tree-like thought), the rhizome is necessarily coterminous with affirmation, spreading everywhere, refusing to establish limits and boundaries, flying in the face of pre-established identities. For rhizomes, there is no beyond.

Trees and rhizomes differ in the sense that they provide different kinds of image. The image of the tree is a metaphor that belongs to metaphysics. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizome” is a metonym that resonates with the intensities of the world. That is not to say that Deleuze and Guattari are nature mystics—guerrilla armies and the



Internet are rhizomatic. We might simply say that a rhizome's movements cannot be pinned down and controlled by discursive power structures.

Let us consider, for a moment, a short section of the film *Jaws*. Whilst looking for the shark, the scientist Hooper (a man who is at home on the sea) is perplexed by the fact that the police chief Brody lives on an island when he is scared of the water. Brody replies: "It's only an island if you look at it from the sea". For Brody, the experience of island life reveals a landlocked internalising and arborescent perspective. He embodies this perspective as the figure of the "law". In contrast Hooper, who spends his life working with sharks in the midst of the flat multiplicity (characterised by intensities) that is the sea, cannot contemplate the distinction between island and sea. Hooper thinks outside the brackets of Brody's legalistic imagination.

Deleuze and Guattari often use linguistics as a model for demonstrating the distinction between rhizomes and trees. Put simply, tree-like approaches to linguistics champion models of grammatical correctness, which conjure the figure of an ideal speaker or listener. In contrast rhizomatic thinking on language turns away from such "power markers" and approaches language in a different way:

A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts sciences and social struggles. A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating very diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs and specialised languages. There is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogenous linguistic community. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 7)

There are several important things to note here. A rhizome, characterised by the line as opposed to the point, establishes connections between linguistic zones, which are kept separate by tree-like thought. By the same token, rhizomatic thinking brings certain aspects of language "the perceptive, mimetic, gestural and cognitive", which are ignored by traditional linguistic models, to the forefront. We are therefore encouraged

to think of language in terms of *intensities* as well as “meaning”. The linguistic universals formulated in traditional grammar are replaced by an understanding of language, which celebrates its multiplicity of “dialects, patois, slangs and specialised languages”. Perhaps more than this, we might say that the “standard” forms of language enact a kind of tree-like violence against the *forest* of languages. Multiple languages are “forced” outside to continue their rhizomatic behaviours around the roots of the dominant “standard language”. This is why Deleuze and Guattari argue that conventional linguistic models do not represent “a method for the people” whereas, “a method of the rhizome type, on the contrary, can analyse language only by decentring it onto other dimensions and other registers. A language is “never closed in on itself, except as a function of impotence” (p. 8)

## **A Rhizomatic Education**

I am well aware that so far this account of rhizomatic thinking might appear rather abstract. Hopefully, by making these ideas work in an educational context, the force of Deleuze and Guattari’s work on the rhizome will come through. Let us consider two scenes from schooling. They are both Classics lessons, and if we think about them in a tree-like way, it might be said that they are both teaching the same thing, namely, the use of hyperbole in classical texts. The first scene depicts a lesson that coheres to the model of good teaching I alluded to earlier when discussing the tree-like structure of the contemporary school.

### **Scene 1**

*A Classics teacher enters the room and writes his outcomes on the board which read:*

*Outcomes: All students will be able to understand “hyperbole” in Classical texts and attempt some examples of their own. Some of the students will be able to produce excellent examples of hyperbole.*

*Having put his objectives on the board, he gives a PowerPoint presentation, which both explains what hyperbole means and provides some easily palatable examples. The*

*class are then required to provide their own examples of hyperbole. The teacher then informs the class that he is going to read a section from a simplified version of The Iliad. He informs the class that he will improvise some sections and involve the students in the improvisation. When they come across examples of hyperbole, they must record them to demonstrate understanding of the concept. The class become engaged in drama activities and perform their examples at the end of the lesson. The teacher conducts a plenary session in which the class provide feedback on what they have learnt.*

The description of the lesson in Scene 1 demonstrates what many teachers would consider to be the strengths of modern pedagogy. The teacher has provided “scaffolding” for the students learning, by providing a step-by-step introduction of the subject matter. The students are made to demonstrate their involvement in the lesson by constructing their own examples of hyperbole and recording instances from the text. The plenary session provides a means for “monitoring” learning. Auditory, visual and kinaesthetic learners needs are accommodated.

The next scene I want to look at possesses none of the “qualities” described above.

## **Scene 2**

*A mature and highly experienced Classics teacher is teaching Year 7 students a simplified version of The Iliad. His lesson follows a structure, which he tends to employ for the majority of his lessons. This involves the reading of the story (he has written his own version), embellished by moments in which the teacher veers off into other stories and areas pertaining to related myths. The class will, on occasions be asked to participate. They will often have to perform a written task at the end of the lesson. His knowledge of the subject is vast and detailed. Eventually he describes the first battle between the Greeks and Trojans. He addresses the class: “How many Trojans did the great Agamemnon slay?” The first student puts her hand up: “Twelve?” “More” replies the teacher. A second student offers a number: “one hundred?” and receives a louder “More!” for his trouble. This goes on for a while, the intensity grows, but the*

*teacher refuses to offer a final number. He stops at three hundred and moves on with a cursory “it was too many to count”.*

The current performative approach to pedagogy would find this teacher’s approach to be far too teacher led and insufficiently “student centred”. Could the teacher empirically demonstrate that all the children were listening, that they were actively involved? Certainly not. Were the students doing something that could be observed and measured? No! The lesson certainly did not cater for kinaesthetic learners, as the whole class remained rooted to their seats. One might well assume that this lesson, had it been observed by an inspector, would have received nothing better than the grade “satisfactory” if that.

Despite (In spite of) the fact that the lesson described in scene 2 failed to conform to the criteria, which make up a good lesson (in accordance with the current orthodoxy), I imagine that few observers would deny that something special had taken place. This “special” quality derives from what we might call an intensity, which displaces the question/answer dialectic. The teacher is asking a question which cannot be answered and resolved by any happy unity or resolution. Indeed, the whole point of the question is that it cannot be satisfactorily answered except by hyperbole. In a sense language here ceases to signify (in straightforward terms) and words become “asignifying particles”—“meaning” as such becomes a secondary concern—the counting is “pointless”. However, we should also note that this does not mean that nothing has been taught—the students “learn” rather than “learn about” hyperbole; they are caught up in hyperbolic intensity. In Scene 1, the abstraction of the concept from its examples leads to a mechanical approach to hyperbole that breaks up the flow of its rhetorical force. The powerful aspects of Scene 2 derive from a situation during which, there are no roots to cling to. Intensity is generated by the fact that the class is somehow “in the middle” in two senses; the scene both takes place in the middle of the lesson, but also, due to the lack of a structuring apparatus it is “in the middle” in a more abstract or teleological sense. Might we not call this an instance of rhizomatic teaching?

It is clear that teaching and learning should and could not always be like scene 2 and is not my intention to enact a dramatic reversal by castigating the teacher in Scene 1 simply because their approach reflects the very embodiment of performativity. The

teacher in Scene 2 does not prepare the students at all for what they are about to witness. By the same token he does not provide them with an explanation of what he is doing. Some students may have a sense of what he is doing but lack the ability to explain/represent it. Others may be utterly confused. They would almost certainly be suspicious about whether or not one man could kill all those people—surely it would be possible to count them. Whether the students have some inkling of what is going on, or are utterly confused is in a sense immaterial. Their imaginations have been stimulated because they cannot feel mastery over what they have just witnessed. They are involved in a “becoming”. This kind of experience is occluded from contemporary pedagogy, yet surely students should have the opportunity to know what it is like to be “all at sea”.

### **Is an Intense Education Elitist?**

When I gave a paper on trees and rhizomes at the Gregynog Philosophy of Education Conference, one of the delegates suggested that the notion of a rhizomatic education had an elitist aspect to it. This was probably not helped by the fact that my educational examples dealt with classics lessons. One might argue that it is all very well to imagine an education which involves an intense experience unencumbered by a structuring apparatus, when the students are already reasonably well balanced, able to control their behaviour and sufficiently intelligent to deal with the disorientating aspects of learning that does not proceed in accordance with measured stages, but what about children who may be less equipped to handle this kind of thing? A flippant response to this issue would be to simply acknowledge the fact that if it only has implications for bright willing students then at least “they” might benefit from an intense education. Of course, the problem that then arises relates to who exactly will feel sufficiently confident to teach in this way given the closed economy of fear that serves to disable so many teachers. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I recall the resistance put up by former colleagues when they were asked to teach A-level English. The colleagues in question were new to the profession—they were all extremely hard-working teachers who spent most of their evenings planning lessons and creating resources. It was not the extra workload that frightened them, but the perception that they would have to teach more difficult material and this would involve the kinds of interaction with students that

could not easily be incorporated into fast-paced tasks. Thinking that this would be well received they asked if they could take on more difficult classes.

Regardless of whether or not a rhizomatic/intense education may be provided to more able students, it would seem remiss to ignore the possibility that an intense education might be available to all. I want to begin by providing what is perhaps a particularly extreme example of the ways in which contemporary approaches to teaching and learning with their focus on structure and scaffolding can lead to some very strange practices. Let us consider this scene.

### Scene 3

*A man came from the local education authority to provide training to members of staff at a secondary school. One part of this training day was devoted to providing ideas for teaching GCSE (14-16) poetry to students in lower sets (lower sets are often composed of academically weak students and/or students whose behaviour is deemed to be detrimental to other's learning). As is quite typical of these occasions, the advisor began by reminding the teachers of the importance of catering for different learning styles—kinaesthetic, auditory and visual. He then demonstrated how one might accommodate the needs of different learners when studying the poem "Vultures" from the Poems from Other Cultures section of the GCSE. One of the figures presented in the poem is the commandant at Auschwitz. The commandant is presented in the poem as a loving family man and the poem clearly wishes to address the moral complexity of his situation. In the first task (designed to accommodate kinaesthetic learners) the teachers were asked to leave their seats and imagine a line between two poles (chairs) representing absolute good and absolute evil. The line incorporated a numerical system in which 1 represented absolute goodness and 10 absolute evil. The teachers were then asked to grade the commandant at Auschwitz to determine his position on the scale.*

The perceived strengths of performing this task are that it will make the poem's moral dilemma clear to students who will otherwise not be able to understand it. The fact that they have to place themselves on a line will help students focus on the task and

hopefully remember it. Now of course, it is easy to criticise this presentation of morality as overly simplistic and reductive, but might we not see it as a platform for developing a more sophisticated moral understanding. It is hard to see how this would work. To make this task convincing the teacher will have to present the notions of absolute good and evil as somehow representative of real states. The same thing goes for the numerical scale that bridges them. To build on this picture would be to dismiss it entirely and this would surely be more confusing for the students. If we leave things to stand this would imply that we our content with the idea that our students visualise and understand moral judgements in accordance with this model. What is perhaps most interesting about scene 3 is that it nicely indicates what Deleuze says about Nietzsche's understanding of knowledge and force.

The force that appropriates the figure of the commandant and places him on a scale between absolute good and absolute evil derives from the fear that things will not be understood and this failure of understanding will be particularly dramatic for kinaesthetic learners. Of course, if we take Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche as it is presented above seriously, then we might simply say that the good and evil scale is simply one way of understanding the moral dilemma that the figure of the commandant confronts us with. However, Nietzsche treatment of forces is not neutral and relativistic. Nietzsche notes that certain objects have affinities with different forces: "Up to now we have presented things as if different forces struggled over and took successive possession of an almost inert object. But the object itself is expression of a force. This is why there is more or less affinity between the object and the force that takes possession of it." (Deleuze, 2005, p. 13) We might therefore argue that understanding the moral status of the commandant once caught in the grip of an inadequate force serves to create a picture of understanding which attempts to gain clarity from something that is obviously not clear and easy to handle.

The scene above is perhaps absurd but its absurdities are certainly not uncommon. However, it will not silence objections to the elitist objections to an intense form of teaching and learning that accompany a more moderate take on contemporary pedagogy. Let us take seriously for a few moments, the possibility that the performative pedagogy with its targets, fast-paced tasks, learning objectives and the mass of behavioural and assessment strategies actually represents an approach to

learning that provides a form, however impoverished, of justice for children who seem either unable to behave in ways deemed socially acceptable or have difficulty with academic work (often the two things go together). Children who don't behave well often find it hard to concentrate—learning objectives will provide a focus that keeps their minds on what they're doing, short, energetic, fast-paced tasks will serve the same function—the children do not have time to become distracted and are constantly stimulated. As a result, they do not try to fight one another. Even if we think that all the talk of learning styles is a lot of nonsense, it might make a good deal of sense to get children who have, to use a common English expression, ants in their pants, to move around the classroom rather than insisting that they suffer the purgatory of being told to remain rooted to their seats. As regards the academically challenged students, scaffolding, in which knowledge is built on from very simple beginnings will give them confidence and enable them to progress. Surely if such students are thrown into the midst of things then they will simply not understand what is going on and are therefore more likely to misbehave out of fear, resentment and frustration.

If we take seriously the issues presented above, then we come to see that “intensity” seems to feature quite prominently. It is undeniable that the students described above bring a great deal of intensity into the classroom with them. Often students who find school difficult will have suffered almost unimaginable forms of abuse and neglect in their home lives. The anger and resentment this produces is not a form of intensity to be lightly dismissed. One might argue, and many do, that a heavily structured classroom environment that is open to differentiated needs will provide the structure and care that is lacking. In effect the classroom becomes (or so it might seem) a benign space that neutralises negative intensities. It might also be argued that such a space need not be so antiseptic as to work to the detriment of a form of intense learning experience even if this is a “counterfeit of education”. Perhaps the fast-paced lessons provide such an experience even if it is an impoverished controlled version of that experience. The contemporary classroom might therefore be seen as the space that neutralises negative intensities and suffuses students with positive energy that is prevented from going awry by the structuring apparatus that has been put in place.

Of course, the picture presented above is not couched in the feverish discourse of the teaching and learning guru. Rather, it represents a more measured approach to aspects



of modern teaching and learning that simply face up to practical realities. Although, I have some sympathy with this position (I have taught children who were extremely challenging), there is something wholly depressing about it. Children whose terrible circumstances have made them say no to life are then represented with the systematic reinforcement of a “no” to their every move. There is no real engagement with the children here, but rather an attempt to “manage” them. For Nietzsche, affirming life is not an easy task as it involves saying “yes” to both what is pleasurable and painful in life.

Perhaps it will be useful here to bring in another image—Nietzsche’s image of the dicethrow. Nietzsche presents the dicethrow as taking place on two distinct tables, the earth and the sky. The earth where the dice are thrown, and the sky where the dice fall back. To know how to play the game properly means to affirm chance—a bad player counts on several throws of the dice, on a great number of throws. In this way he makes use of causality and probability to produce a combination that he sees as desirable. He posits this combination as an end to be obtained, hidden by causality. Such players are “Timid, ashamed, awkward, like a tiger whose leap has failed. But what of that you dicethrowers! You who have not learned to play and mock as a man ought to play and mock” (Deleuze, 2005, p. 14).

Playing and mocking, affirming chance, what might these things mean in the context of teaching and learning? To provide a dinky formula would somehow defy the point, it would not be in the spirit of the game. However, to tell a story might be more appropriate.

## **Scene 4**

Before I joined the teaching profession, I went to observe lessons in a local school. I arrived late to the lesson I want to describe, as I had to walk across half the school following an earlier observation. On entering the room the room, I felt as though I had encountered a world of chaos. There was a tremendous amount of noise, the teacher was talking, half the class were talking, several students were grabbing the teacher around the waist—there seemed to be movement wherever you looked. The board was

covered in writing, but unlike the other lessons I observed, there were no learning objectives. It was hard to avoid the thought that I might have been sent here to see an example of “bad practice”. However, it quickly became apparent that the students were working, just not all at the same time and in the same way. Those who were hugging the teacher were waiting for help, which he provided as soon as he’s finished talking to another group. Sometimes the teacher was discussing the lesson with students, at other points he was engaging in banter with the “naughty kids” yet this was both linguistically creative and funny. If it looked like it might go too far, the teacher simply turned his attention elsewhere. Not everyone in the class was doing the same thing, “differentiation” was in place, yet the students were evidently not sitting in rigidly designed attainment groups—if they needed help they knew who could help them and this was not always the teacher. The lesson was clearly not organised according to a three-part structure—everything just seemed to flow and move along at different speeds.

What is so interesting about this lesson, it neither looks like an old-fashioned teacher-led lesson, nor the kind of “modern” lesson described above, yet it clearly takes things from both models. The teacher could ask lengthy questions or give detailed responses to questions, but did not require silence to do this. People were moving around the room but not in a rigidly controlled manner. The lesson clearly built on previous work, but not in a way that could be characterised by a discrete series of lessons that formed a scheme of work. The lesson ebbed and flowed. It took on board plurality yet it was one shimmering entity. Students were not always “on task” yet they returned to their work after they’d asked the teacher or their peers for help. Of course, the teacher could not be sure that this was going on—I could only be sure because I was not teaching—yet this did not frighten him—he had thrown the dice and they came back to him because he believed they would.

## **Conclusion**

I am not for one moment suggesting that rhizomatic or intense pedagogies must resemble the lesson described above. Intensity takes different forms—it doesn’t have to be loud. For teachers to simply use this as some kind of template would also miss the

point. What I have tried to show is that the current pedagogical norms stifle teachers, and students alike. Such stifling can pertain to knowledge, to behaviour and to the flow from one sphere of life into another. I am also not arguing that teachers should simply let things happen—some structures will invariably be put in place, yet those structures can be flexible positions from which teachers have the confidence to throw the dice and affirm chance.

Having been a teacher, I anticipate certain problems my former peers might have with some of the arguments presented above. Perhaps we might say that the tree-like structures in place in the school and lesson are the only thing preventing the students from going berserk. Might we not say that, in certain areas, many students lead rhizomatic existences, with no parental discipline, often living in two or more houses, spending half the night on the street destroying everything that comes into their path. Surely we owe these students a sense of order, a tree to cling to when they are not forced to burrow around outside.

Although I have some sympathy for this position, I feel that it assumes and often generates a deficit model, failing to see that sometimes the tree-like structures are the very things that cause the students to rebel and wreak havoc. Again, I anticipate a certain objection. Classrooms are not the rigid, silent places they once were. In the name of auditory learning, children are regularly encouraged to discuss their ideas with one another. For the benefit of kinaesthetic learners, students often get to move around and discover things in the classroom. However, the cold theorising that accompanies “learning styles” and “outcomes” based approaches, serves to strangle intensities, diluting the force and range of experience that might characterise a fulfilling and stimulating form of education. Do we really want our students to be afraid of the water?

The fear that accompanies a rhizomatic/intense pedagogy derives from the fact that it would not proceed in accordance with a stage by stage process that links back to some originary point—the end would not predetermined—we have the fear of the void. Because a structuring apparatus is lacking we have the fear of confusion—how will children cope if their knowledge has not been “scaffolded”? The lack of a predetermined structure may produce confusion if the teacher does not subdivide the

lesson into neat building blocks, yet in the name of intensity this confusion is affirmed. If students have difficulties these are dealt with in the moment and become part of the rhizome. The teacher would neither be facilitating learning nor imparting knowledge, but would be part of a process in which, following Blake *et al.*, knowledge is not a coherent separate object, but is drawn and shaped by the intense classroom experience—there is no divide between Apollonian reason and Dionysiac intensity.

# Conclusion

During the course of this thesis, we have looked at various ways in which ideas concerning performatives and performativity might have something to say to education. In this concluding chapter, I want to do attend to some comparisons and contrasts. This will perhaps serve the ends of clarity and allow the indication of one or two preferences. I use the word “preferences” here slightly guardedly. In a sense preferences have already been expressed (for Lyotard’s agonistics over Habermas’s consensus, Butler’s “magic” over Bourdieu’s, Cavell’s passion over narrow analytic accounts of the moral life). To speak of preferences is to do one’s best to steer clear of the Socratism that Nietzsche railed against. Moreover, I am not for one minute suggesting that philosophers such as Habermas, Bourdieu and Hand have nothing interesting to say to education. Indeed, I hope I have not given the opposite impression during the course of the thesis. The attempt to do philosophy of education presented here bears some relation to what Cavell describes in this fragment, which appears in *Philosophy The Day After Tomorrow*, a book that is dedicated to “praise”:

As for Chapter 8, on Wittgenstein, its mode is characteristic of the way I am moved to philosophize, or wish to be moved to philosophize, namely non-polemically or non-argumentatively. This does not mean that I agree with everything that I find calls for a response, but rather it means that criticism in my writing often tends either to invoke the idea Kant established for “critique,” namely articulating the conditions which allow a coherent utterance to be made, or a purposeful action to

enter the world, or else to provide an explication or elaboration of a text—sometimes of the merest fragment, sometimes one of my own—that accounts for, at its best increases, which is to say appreciates, my interest in it. Elaborates it philosophically, I would say. What is that to say? (Cavell, 2005, p. 4)

What is that to say? Cavell's avoidance of polemic is what we might call an inclusive (though hardly acritical) approach to philosophising, which appeals to be heard and responds to appeals to be heard. This is also the aim of this thesis.

Towards the end of "Performative and Passionate Utterance" Cavell makes it clear what he "wants" from philosophy, namely that "we shall not stop at what we should or ought to say, nor at what we may say and do say, but take in what we must and dare not say, or have it at heart to say, or are too confused or too tame or wild or terrorized to say or to think to say" (p. 185). Here Cavell appears to be saying that an acknowledgement of passion and the perlocutionary effect of the utterance are as relevant to a moral way of philosophising as to moral encounters in general. This is because these factors relate to an openness in which ideas will not be silenced. It is as though Cavell were suggesting that a certain illocutionary force surrounded particular approaches to philosophy, inhibiting them. He does not say as much, but following his recognition that his treatment of the passionate utterance might be thought by some to occupy the realm of psychoanalysis (an area typically of much interest to philosophers classed as "continental thinkers") he appears to be alluding to the schism between analytic and continental philosophy:

It is little help in this work, to my mind, to take reassurance from the supposed fact (on certain readings of Austin and the later Wittgenstein) that language *is* public, that it is shared. This prompts us to avoid seeking sociably to provide help and example sufficient to *make* it public, to see it shared, the first step toward which might be, as in Wittgenstein, and in Freud, to recognise when it has become private. (ibid.)

In various ways many of the philosophers presented in this thesis clearly share Cavell's desire to see philosophy in broad terms. After all, Austin might seem to be a strange choice of ally (or opponent) for the likes of Derrida and Butler. Yet clearly they have engaged with a tradition outside the realms of their familiar remit and seen something powerful in it. The extent to which the engagement is reciprocated is the questionable. Of course, this thesis tends to favour what is generally referred to as Continental philosophy, but at the same time analytic philosophers such as Strawson, Grice and Searle are included here—their voices are part of the discourse of the thesis. I am not trying to trump their ideas as if we were at an imaginary philosophy themed private gentlemen's club (that philosophy can sometimes seem like such a club says something about the state of the discipline). Rather, I have tried to bring out (make public?) the aporias and gaps in that philosophy. I believe (to use Habermas's phrase to apply to him and others) that they have taken a "wrong turn". I have tried to show how this "wrong turn" is largely the result of a failure to take on board the rhetorical aspects of our being in the world and the possibilities these aspects engender.

In this spirit, in the forthcoming pages I will consider the relative merits of the various philosophies that have thus far been championed (to a greater or lesser extent). This will not result in the elimination of various ideas until my pawn becomes a queen. Rather there are some uncomfortable aspects to some of the philosophies presented so far that I want to return to or bring out.

## **Compare and Contrast**

Let us begin with Butler and Cavell. Having considered Butler's and Cavell's philosophies, we see that in rather different ways their attempts to extend (or depart from) Austin's theory of the performative utterance represent resistances to moralism. By recognising the iterability of language, Butler draws attention to the creative/destructive aspects of language, which is to say that words may "do" just as they may "do us in". Cavell, with his discussion of perlocutions, demonstrates how the unconventional aspects of language make room for the expressive aspects of moral exchange—to ignore such aspects can only lead to moralism. Of course, in different ways, they also reframe epistemological questions in regard to moral theory. For

Butler, “truth” and knowledge claims are coterminous with performative discourses, whereas Cavell recognises the limited relevance of epistemological concerns in regard to moral issues. Both writers have important things to say about moral education in its most general sense, and, as I hope to show, about moral education in the context of schooling (not that these areas should be regarded as distinctive realms).

To develop what has already been said, it might be helpful at this point to provide an example (taken from the hurly-burly of life) that demonstrates the complex aspects of the moral universe (conceived of in linguistic terms) that Butler and Cavell are, in different ways, trying to capture and expose. It should be noted that the example we are about to consider is rather typical of recent approaches to “racist” language within the British media. Two years ago, a contestant on the reality television show “Big Brother” (a Channel 4 programme on British television) was removed from the programme following her use of the term “nigger” to a black housemate. It should be noted that the woman in question meant no harm when using this word—it was a term that she and her friends commonly used due to its frequent appearance in the black American music that they listened to. Although the programme-makers were obviously aware of the context, it was felt that the term’s inappropriateness should lead to her being removed. Subsequently the woman was hounded by reporters and vilified in the press.

It is tempting to applaud Channel 4’s handling of this matter—especially in view of its contrast with British television’s rather murky (if distant) past as regards racist programming. Indeed, from a legalistic standpoint on racism one might say that the woman was simply wrong to have used the word at all. However, this seems overly dramatic given the context. Indeed one can hardly avoid thinking about context here—what if a black contestant had used the word? However, simply to invoke context also seems to miss the point: the woman who was on the receiving end of the word was clearly shaken by it, although not horrified—she knew that nobody was trying to insult or abuse her. Might we, following Butler, say that her shock may derive from the fact that the word “nigger” carries its old horrific contexts with it, in spite of her modest reaction derived from the “dilution” of the term due to its appearances in contemporary culture? We might also say that the expulsion from the show of the woman who had used the term represented something of a disaster for moral education. Had she remained then the kind of passionate exchange celebrated by Cavell may have been on



show for millions of viewers to engage with. Instead, speech was stultified. The difficult things that needed saying were left unsaid.

So far I have presented Butler's and Cavell's ideas as distinct and possibly complementary—as though these writers simply looked at language and morality from different perspectives, as though together they completed the circle. However, though both Cavell and Butler have important things to say about the moral life, it is important to note that a certain dissonance comes into play when their arguments are drawn together. For both writers, Austin's project is diminished by his fixation with illocutions. For Butler this is at the expense of locutions, for Cavell, perlocutions. However, it might be argued that Cavell's project begins one stage too late—by focusing on what is done “by” words, Cavell forgets about the words themselves. When Butler recognises how unstable locutions are, this impacts on the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects of language. In her account of performativity, Butler presents language as a disorderly machine, but a machine nonetheless. The expressive voice that Cavell introduces has no real place in this schema. Does this entail that Cavell's project is misguided, that he is guilty of privileging the voice and indulging in phonocentrism?

To take this view would be a radical misrepresentation of Cavell's argument. Like Austin, Cavell believes that we “indulge” in language—we are what we say. To see things in this light is not phonocentric—phonocentrism implies some kind of separation between thoughts/ideas and language. This separation does not feature in Cavell's philosophical writing. Rather, he makes room for individual expression recognising that whilst we speak language, it speaks us. Cavell's account of passionate utterance can therefore incorporate iterability into the picture as that which is coterminous with expression. We might say that Butler's performativity requires sustenance from Cavell's passion

Whereas Butler's argument regarding performativity has an important historical dimension, her foray into language still represents the cold form of theorising of which Cavell is suspicious. Moreover, Butler's overly “theoretical” account represents a world-view that has attracted a popular following, a movement if you like. In contrast, Cavell's philosophy is rather resistant to “theorizing”, if “theorizing” means standing

back from the world and therefore not engaging with lived bodily experience—it is there that the moral life resides. This is not a disavowal of political responsibility, but a more cautious and ultimately more searching approach to ethical and political matters.

My preference for Cavell's moral philosophy will hopefully become clear when we consider the role that Butler and Cavell's thinking might play within the setting of formal schooling. To illustrate the significance of their ideas it is helpful to consider an educational scene that shows what is at stake. The reader may remember this scene from Chapter 4. In British schooling, there is a legal requirement to provide training on racism. I shall describe a session on the subject of racism given at a high school:

*A speaker was brought in to give a presentation on racism. He began by providing by a series of definitions that prescribe what ethnicity, race, racism and racist behaviour mean. The manner of delivery involved the speaker questioning the audience as to what they thought racism was, followed by the right answer; the answer that was defined by law. Both question and answer appeared in a PowerPoint presentation; the latter magically appeared to create the effect of a moment of illumination. Once the teachers had been fully briefed on various definitions the talk moved on to the various things they should “do” about racism. This involved two notable forms of behaviour on their part. Firstly, they discovered that it was a legal requirement that they officially record every instance of racism if it conformed to the legal definition of that term. Secondly, they were encouraged not to punish the perpetrator of the offence (the speaker's words) but to discuss the issue with them.*

Considered from a Cavellian perspective, it is apparent that the speaker makes an unquestioning appeal to convention and works with a supposedly purely epistemological understanding of moral issues. As noted above, moral education (in the most general sense of the term) requires the constant possibility of exchange. Yet the legalistic discourse of this speaker stands above the kinds of ordinary exchange that could take place in the classroom. It fails to account for the ways in which views on racism are passionately held by students and puts an enforced consensus in place, whereby students are not permitted to find out where they stand—to give or withhold assent. If we are to do justice to our students, then recognising the importance of “commitment, or an expression of assent” does not celebrate chaos (a fear which is

surely endemic to the speaker's discourse). Rather, it will represent the difficult task of promoting shared entry into a common world.

There is more to say about this scene regarding Cavell's thoughts on passionate utterance, and we shall come back to this shortly. In the meantime let us consider again (as we did in Chapter 4) how Butler's understanding of performativity problematises the speaker's approach.

As Butler argues, the ethical dimension of performativity is bound up with iterability, whereby we are not controlled or constructed by language in any absolute sense. Trying to provide a legal context to shore up the meaning of racist behaviour should not and will not limit the contexts within which the discussion can take place. In recognising the iterability of language we move toward a very different approach to racial issues. Here, rather than making the assumption that certain behaviour must always and all times be offensive, teachers might ask questions about how offensive behaviour works. As noted in Chapter 4, they might conduct experiments long the lines of "blue eyes, brown eyes".

This is all well and good, but talking about what the teacher might do here seems to encourage a rather formulaic approach to how teachers go about their work in the classroom. Although it is clearly important that moral education takes on board the historical and linguistic aspects of racism, there is a sense in which Butler's approach to performativity may become too conventional when incorporated into educational settings (this has already happened in Gender Studies). It is possible, if slightly far-fetched, to imagine a training day in which Butler's performativity might be presented (and over-simplified) in a PowerPoint presentation so as to "illuminate" racial issues. The "blue eyes, brown eyes" film might be shown to teachers to illustrate how Butler's ideas might be incorporated into the classroom. Though this would certainly be an improvement on the kind of "training" offered by the speaker, "training" is perhaps not what is called for.

During my time working in a high school, I recall supervising a trainee teacher on her first teaching practice who decided to attempt the "blue eyes, brown eyes" experiment with my class. Despite taking the courageous decision to engage in this activity, the

student became nervous, and decided to give the game away by explaining what she was about to do before conducting the experiment<sup>33</sup>. Of course, this made the whole thing rather pointless, yet the student's choice shows something interesting. Her insecurities were perhaps justified—she would have had to put herself on the line and possibly face all manner of rebuff. To conduct that experiment properly involves entry into dark and difficult territory recognising (to paraphrase parts of Cavell's 7<sup>th</sup> condition for perlocutions) that at any point the students might contest your invitation to exchange or deny that they had any standing with you. What is so interesting about the “blue eyes, brown eyes” experiment is that it is not something that one can be “trained” to carry out. What I mean is that it requires a level of experience, practical judgement and confidence that cannot be simply passed on in formulaic terms. It cannot be planned for if planning amounts to containment. It cannot be delivered in a Power Point presentation.

Part of what is so disturbing about the speaker on racism's presentation is the “magical” illuminating quality that PowerPoint seems to give his words. This type of approach can formally inhibit the kinds of exchange that Cavell champions by smoothing over the difficult aspects of communication and silencing the voices that demand to be heard. There is therefore perhaps something potentially sinister about teaching/training through PowerPoint—the lure of this technology is that it gives the teacher/trainer something to hide behind, the sort of mask that Austin expresses such disdain for. Of course, Austin's mistake is to associate political screening or manipulation with the entire perlocutionary realm, as well perhaps as being sometimes stuck, so it would seem, with the present indicative active.

By taking on perlocutions Cavell enters where Austin fears to tread—into the realm of the disorderly, blood(i)ed life of language. In choosing this path, he presents a treatment of language that veers away from the kinds of thinking that might be illuminated on a screen and the bleak form of power that this represents. Indeed, if there are pedagogical lessons to be learnt from Cavell's treatment of expression, they relate to an attitude towards teaching and learning that is radically at odds with the form of “effectiveness” that PowerPoint provides and symbolically endorses. Iterability

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<sup>33</sup> I want to note that I am not suggesting that this experiment is wholly unproblematic. There are clearly some strong ethical objections to conducting it. It might be seen as cruel and/or patronising.

may play its part here. In “Democratic Participation and the Body Politic”, Standish argues that difficult forms of exchange are important in the development of a moral education. Through such exchange, children will come to recognise that they cannot “fall back on any secure sense of identity. . . Against the ready-made possibilities of identity that are offered to them—indeed, against the idea of a stable identity itself—they must come to accept its deferral, to recognise that an identity must be more carefully, and more painfully worked out” (Standish 2005b, p. 384). Here iterability enters the picture—our lack of absolute control over identity (which is subject to the dynamic forces within language) will unnerve us. The ways in which we learn to deal with this will enrich our moral lives.

By arguing for the superiority (and inclusiveness) of Cavell’s vision, I am not dismissing the importance of alerting children to the performative aspect of race. However, this must necessarily involve a recognition of and indulgence in the expressive engagement that has characterised and may continue to characterise the struggle for racial equality.

Butler’s treatment of performativity and Cavell’s passionate utterance bring attention to the linguistic complexities of the moral life. As we saw in Chapter 5, such complexities are often elided within the philosophy of education in favour of epistemological considerations concerning, for example, whether certain issues may be thought of as controversial. Such theorising invariably stands at a distance from the lived linguistic life of the classroom. If we are to respond to the “worldly” issues of performance and passion, then we must give up PowerPoint thinking and give way to philosophical force.

## **Derrida and Cavell**

As I have expressed a preference here for Cavell’s philosophy over Butler’s, the reader might expect that sentiment to extend to a preference for Cavell to Derrida. After all, Derrida’s account of iterability provides the bedrock for Butler’s discussion. However, things are not, I think, so straightforward. Derrida’s philosophy differs from Butler’s in important ways. For a start, it deals with more general issues to do with language *per*

se. Moreover, there is no sense in which Derrida is trying to develop a “social theory”. A resistance to theorising characterises the work of Lyotard, Derrida, Cavell and Deleuze. In this sense, if a preference is to be put forward it is for the work of these four philosophers. Reservations about Lyotard will be discussed later in the chapter.

In the meantime, it is worth noting a strange relationship between Cavell and Derrida’s philosophy. Cavell’s decision to treat the literariness of philosophical writing resonates strongly with Derrida’s consideration of the irony that emanates from the work of philosophers who adopt literary methods to castigate or belittle writing. In the case of Austin, Cavell notes the former’s “somewhat manic tone reporting his discovery of a type of utterance that neither is nonsense or true or false” (Cavell, p.160). Referring to Ayer’s *Language Truth and Logic*, Cavell writes: “(it appeared in 1936); in my edition from ten years later, a new Introduction by Ayer excuses the young man’s passion in the writing of the text but reaffirms the belief ‘that the point of view it expresses is substantially correct’.)” (p. 162)

Though there are some parallels, the “expressive” tone in Cavell’s writing speaks of a “personal” engagement with philosophy that Derrida would arguably have little time for. To note this “personal” quality is not, as discussed above, to accuse Cavell of phonocentrism. It might however point to a something of the order of “authenticity” that Cavell’s philosophy gestures toward. There seems to be a lot of talk of the “self”, of what “I” do, in Cavell that would, I think, seem strange to Derrida, a Levinasian at heart. Then again, I am probably being unfair to Cavell. It might be helpful at this point to draw a limited analogy between Cavell’s and Charles Taylor’s approaches to ethics. In arguing against the cold dispassionate role of autonomy that characterises certain analytic readings of the moral life, Taylor shows how a sense of self gained through recognising what I am responsible for is both dependent on exchanges with other people and the horizon of significance (socio-cultural norms) that provide their background. In a sense, we might see Cavell’s development of Austin’s argument (in the direction of exchange) as a contribution within the philosophy of language that leads to similar conclusions. However things are not quite as straightforward as this. Consider these remarks by Taylor on authenticity:

Briefly, we can say that [on the one hand] authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that [on the other hand] it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance . . . and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue. That these demands may be in tension has to be allowed. But what must be wrong is a simple privileging of one over the other, of [the active dimension] (A), say, at the expense of [the passive dimension] (B), or vice versa. (Taylor, 1991, p. 24)

A crucial difference here between Cavell and Taylor (besides the fact that Cavell has nothing directly to say about authenticity) is that, for the latter, the creative aspects of our moral encounters are associated with individual creativity, whereas “self-definition” in dialogue is represented as a containing/conventional aspect of moral encounters. In contrast, for Cavell, the creative individualised aspects of the moral life require exchange. Just as Taylor dilutes the individualistic aspects of rational autonomy and authenticity (conceived in a Sartrean sense) by emphasising the importance of our relationship to both others and the world, he still retains an opposition between the individual actor and her social environment. In contrast, for Cavell the individual aspects of speech are dissimulated through its unpredictable unconventional aspect. Austin’s recognition that the self constitutes itself linguistically and publicly is still part of Cavell’s plan, but, as Mulhall (Mulhall, 2006) notes, it has been subject to a sea change by embracing perlocutions. The “self” presented by Cavell here is perhaps not too far removed from Derrida’s notion of self as an effect of language.

I have no more to say about the tensions (or lack of) between Derrida and Cavell’s philosophy. They both have, I believe, extremely interesting things to say to education. We shall leave Cavell now (he has played his last scene in this thesis) though Derrida will make a further cameo appearance. Let us now consider some other tensions (though tensions might not be the right word).

## Lyotard

As I argued in Chapter 2, Lyotard's performativity represented a powerful prognosis of what would happen to education (and society more generally). However his ways of thinking through and beyond this state of affairs tend to privilege dissonance or negation. In 'Pointlessness and the University of Beauty' (an essay that has been cited several times already), Bearn offers a way of thinking that moves beyond negative terms and discursive boundaries. Bearn's response to Lyotard is very much in keeping with the Nietzschean spirit of the previous chapter. Indeed, the influence of Deleuze and Nietzsche is readily acknowledged by Bearn.

For Bearn, the "issue" (I would hesitate to say the "problem") with Lyotard's thought is that it approaches the other side of representation from this side. This is very Deleuzian, and Bearn quotes Deleuze who argues that representation represents "groundlessness as a completely undifferentiated abyss, a universal lack of difference, an indifferent blank nothingness". (Deleuze quoted in Bearn, 2000, p. 242). Therefore, if we look at things from this side of representation and if something comes out of this, it will be "incomprehensible: as terrifying as dread or as wonderful as grace" (ibid.). Whereas Lyotard's discussion of the other side of representation represents a doubled negation, a no followed by a no, Bearn supplements this with an account of full-fledged affirmation. Interestingly, he develops this position in relation to another short (marginal?) section of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* on "free beauties".

Free beauties include "the foliage on wallpaper" and "music not set to words" (Kant, 1987, sect. 16). Though we might approach these things in negative terms (in accordance with the sublime), Bearn argues that there is another affirmative way not by subtracting negations but by increasing them. He returns to Lyotard's two steps backward from representation and chronological time. He argues that non-representationality, pointlessness, escaping the chronological now, and loss of the self "come in two flavours: negative and positive".

Bearn gives us a flavour of what this means when thinking about the non-representational patterns on wallpaper. If we look at these patterns from this side and



see them in negative terms we will be agitated and experience a serious negative pleasure. However, if we open ourselves and caress the patterns, forms will slip and slide away. Repetition can allow us to see differences in things that we thought were identical. Bearn mentions taking the same drive or rereading a book. On each occasion, repetition releases swarms of differences. What seemed identical is not identical. The point here seems to be that when we go slow and “caress” our surroundings, our world is changed radically—there was something always waiting to be experienced that our representational practices would not let in. Affirmation for Bearn is about letting ourselves travel with this intense sensuous experience of the world. Thinking should not move to either the technical rhythms of march-time or the bounce of syncopation (which is its reworked opposite) but dance to Messiaën’s disparate rhythms (p. 251).

Before considering what all this means for education, let us entertain some rational “objections” to Bearn’s “argument”. It seems difficult to fathom what Bearn is talking about when he writes about caressing the patterns in the wallpaper. Where on earth is this going to get us? We might stare at the wallpaper for a bit, our eyes will go funny and we’ll see some new shapes. So what, we might say? The whole business of caressing wallpaper with our eyes sounds perverse, even a bit kinky. What is more, why does Bearn compare this activity with going for a drive or reading a book? We might accept that rereading a book might introduce new things and that the “same” drive will never be the same drive, but these are quite different sorts of thing. In the case of reading a book, one is surely engaged in an activity that involves understanding. This cannot be the case when one stares at wallpaper. By the same token, why does Bearn dismiss syncopation due to its dependence on regular metre yet imagine that a more radical departure is not still a departure that gains its significance from those same coordinates of the starting point? What on earth is Bearn talking about when he criticises Lyotard for looking at the other side of representation from this side? How does he know that the other side is a swarm of differences?

One can look at things this way and raise quite legitimate criticisms. However, to think like this is not to approach Bearn on his own terms. Indeed treating what he has to say as a conventional argument will miss the point—it will create the very kind of dialectic that Bearn (following Nietzsche) wishes to overcome. To accept Bearn we must open ourselves to a way of thinking that is “aesthetic” not rational-dialectical. So, for

example, caressing clearly has sensual/sexual connotations, but it is exactly this mode of experiencing the world that is occluded from rational thought. This is not to say that Bearn is opposed to rational thought *per se*. It is simply that rational thought must be dispersed amongst the other forms of experience.

When he talks of caressing and moving to different rhythms, Bearn cannot be advocating a form of education that lacks a rational dimension. The activities that must become beautiful must generally involve a rational component. Bearn's antipathy towards "rational thinking" is working against the ascetic distance from the object that rational thought (untempered by intensity) is typically inclined to seek. Truth is therefore not the only or indeed not the primary concern: "nobody really cares about truth, just truth" (Bearn, 2000, p. 253). Here I take the emphasis to be on the words "cares" and "just". Bearn is only disregarding truth in its caged generic sense. By the same token the point that nobody cares about truth is that nobody is engaged in a bodily way with "truth", as a concern with truth (and truth alone) can, as we have learned to believe, only be cerebral. More than this, rational thought (or thought concerned with truth) must still retain the model of a coherent self that thinks, whilst Bearn's Dionysian approach dissimulates the self through intense particles. Getting lost in the wallpaper seems like a mundane activity, but that it seems this way is partly Bearn's point. How much of our lives are spent following the repeating patterns along the pavement? Or the richness and movement of the lines of wallpaper? The ordinariness of this experience makes us shy away and seek something more substantial, in fact something in more reified terms: we must go to the art gallery (where the followers of Lyotard reside). Caressing wallpaper is therefore not a metaphor for other kinds of less mundane activities. It is rather part of the metonymic experience of intensity in which one is carried along by the flows of the world—in which activities meet one another in multiple ways and sometimes depart together. Though syncopation and dispersed rhythms both depart from regular measures, there is a sense in which syncopation is like a theoretical response. It is caught in a dialectic. Caressing the wallpaper is not.

Bearn's thought sometimes works in oppositional terms, but this is not in opposition to the kind of "litigation" that characterises rational argument. Rather it is in opposition to absence. Lyotard's negative move was to subtract—desires, purposes and the self. For

Bearn, to be freed from the constraints of goal-directed thinking requires no subtraction, but must be thought of in terms of what happens in the middle, where we get lost in a swarm of different thoughts, ideas, feelings, worries, enjoyments. Goals (the point of things) do not exactly disappear, but their determining quality is hijacked by the multiplicity of experience: there are an indeterminate number of goals/points. Moreover, there is a general goal that defies teleological boundaries—the goal of becoming intense. This represents an affirmative overcoming of chronological time.

## **The University of Beauty and the Beautiful School**

Performativity is blind to the “swarm of intense differences” because it, like any genre of discourse, can only “regiment” intensity and “tie it in a knot”. The goal as mentioned earlier of Bearn’s vision is to release intensity. This release should characterise “The University of Beauty”. In keeping with the affirmative thrust of Bearn’s argument, this will not simply involve a departure from certain activities that are often associated with the culture of effectiveness such as various forms of vocational training. It is not the training that is the problem but the genre of discourse that has tied it in a knot and made our understanding of training anaemic and technical (p. 254). All sorts of activities, whether they take place in the humanities or sciences or indeed whether or not they involve training for a vocation, can be diffused through intense particles. What matters is that the fires of the imagination are ignited and burn “with a fire that does not consume” (p. 247). Moreover, the university should be an intensity machine breaking through disciplinary boundaries. This approach should be playful, as this will help us break free of received representational frameworks for thinking.

It is interesting to note that Bearn’s vision of the university can easily “cross over” to thinking about the school. This is partly due to both the affirmation characterised by overcoming the academic/vocational hierarchy and the recognition of ordinary experience. Indeed, perhaps the school with its less pretentious ambitions might be a more obvious candidate than the university for becoming intense and beautiful.

## Affirmation and Arrivants

We have seen how Lyotard and Bearn (whose position is very Nietzschean/Deleuzian) move in different directions: one toward negation, the other affirmation. However, philosophies of absence need not be pessimistic. Indeed, at various points in this thesis, we have considered the more positive philosophy of absence supplied by Derrida. One way of discussing a commonality, which is also a difference, between Derridian and Deleuzian philosophies, might be to see them as two kinds of metonymic philosophy.

During my time as a schoolteacher I frequently had to teach the difference between metaphor and metonymy. *Metaphors*, I explained, must replace other ways of putting things. Similes (a kind of metaphor) involve using the words “like” and “as”—“like a bear”, “she was as cold as ice”. Hence, to do this I would give examples: “the sun” might be *replaced* with the “eye of heaven”. This is based on the idea of there being some kind of resemblance between the metaphor and the thing it stands for. *Metonyms*, by contrast, were best explained by giving examples of what metonyms are: the crown stands for the king. In these cases a part of the thing in question is taken to stand for the whole.

Why does this matter? It matters to me because I want to introduce the idea that some kinds of philosophy—in fact, some ways of thinking more generally—are metonymic. Let’s approach this by asking, first, how some kinds of philosophy (and thinking) may depend on metaphor. This applies to philosophies that depend upon some kind of a gap between, for example, the actual and the ideal, perhaps between language and logic. . . . Where there is such a gap, one element in the binary is privileged. A clear case of this is in Plato’s theory of the Forms (the ideal forms that for Plato are the most real things and that contrast with the changing objects of our experience). Obviously this is crucial for what we think of as Western forms of thought. This makes us believe that the actualities of our experience are somehow second-rate: they are inferior to the ultimate reality, the realm of the Forms. A version of this way of thinking is inherited by Christianity. We can see here its connection with a certain kind of metaphysics: metaphor connects with metaphysics!

This may seem remote from life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but it is not. Think for a moment of an ordinary department store. We are presented with a kind of ideal world where all items are in perfect condition and everything is arranged beautifully. When we go to the store and purchase something, we feel we are brought closer to this ideal world—almost perhaps as if this were like a religious experience. Just think for a moment of the compulsion that people feel to go shopping—as if they were spiritually drawn. On the negative side, this can make us feel that our actual lives—our homes, our clothes, our kitchens—are second-rate, not how things should be. In fact, a similar process is at work through television. Advertisements work on us in this way, constantly presenting the world that we should aspire to live in. So also do series such as *Friends*, which glamorise a way of life, making us feel that this is really how people should be. All this is relevant to ordinary everyday *unhappiness*. Phillip Larkin’s poem ‘Essential Beauty’ catches something of this.

In frames as large as room that face all ways  
And block the ends of streets with giant loaves  
Screen graves with custard, cover slums with praise  
Of motor-oil and cuts of salmon, shine  
Perpetually these sharply-pictured groves  
Of how life should be. High above the gutter  
A silver knife sinks into golden butter (Larkin, 1962)

We can also relate these images of an idealised world to the way the classroom has become. Instead of the dynamic and sometimes heated space that this used to be, it is now characterised more by the cool air of a climate-control system. The atmosphere has become antiseptic through an overreliance on ICT. Everywhere you look there are laminated cards with lists of learning objectives. Teachers will be smartly dressed and smiling, as if they were young executives efficiently managing the business at hand. Activities will be “well targeted”. Lesson plans, and the discourse of the teacher during the lesson, must remain “on message”.

Derrida takes issue with the whole structure of thought that lies behind this. For him, it is not the case that there are truths to the world that are already there but waiting to find words. Rather, language generates a metaphysics through its own workings, through

the repetition of words in connection with other words. Meaning is only possible through interdependence, and there is no final stability. This is metonymic because meaning is generated through contiguity (where one thing touches another) and not through representation (where one thing stands for or replaces something else). A crown touches the head of a king or queen, and part of what you see when you see a king is the crown on that person's head. Metaphor is, in a sense, the enemy: Derrida's philosophy is metonymic due to its resistance to logocentrism, which is, in a sense, necessarily "metaphorical":

[M]etaphoric mediation has insinuated itself into the relationship and has simulated immediacy; the writing of truth in the soul, opposed by *Phaedrus* (278a) to bad writing (writing in the "literal" [*propre*] and ordinary sense, "sensible" writing, "in space"), the book of Nature and God's writing, especially in the Middle Ages: all that functions as *metaphor* in these discourses confirms the privilege of the logos and founds the "literal" meaning then given to writing: a sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal verity, eternally thought and spoken in the proximity of a present logos. The paradox to which attention must be paid is this: natural and universal writing, intelligible and nontemporal writing, is thus named by metaphor. (Derrida, 1997, p.15)

Metaphor always implies the notion that there is some kind of origin that the metaphor stands in for or represents. Logocentric thought with its world-word hierarchy is in this sense always metaphorical. Because Derrida exposes the absence of an origin(al) metaphysics through his discussion of "the mark", he shows language to be fundamentally metonymic. For Derrida, words do not refer to something that is "there". They come to "mean" due to their relationship with other words and through being repeated. As there is no binary code for deciphering metonyms, they come to stand for the concealed truth about language. It is, if you like, the metonymic quality of language that allows for the education of the arrivant.

There is, however, another kind of philosophy that is also metonymic. Derrida's ideas about language derive especially from a Heideggerian and Levinasian background. As we have seen, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy is more Nietzschean in character. In

contrast to Derrida, the metonymic aspect of Deleuze's philosophy is captured by the figure of the rhizome. As we saw in the last chapter, rhizomes are metonyms that resonate with the intensities of the world. The tree is a metaphor because it is a fabrication, a symbol of power that tries to control the multiplicity of things. Indeed, the "tree" with its roots is, by its nature, bound to metaphor. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari depict the universe as a flat realm across which multiple intensities meet and depart on lines of flight. There is no governing "identity" that can exercise full control of this process.

An intensity is an experience, they say, that is allowed to move across a flat plane. But what then does that mean? Intensities do not happen all the time. They are a matter rather of what happens in the middle, when things are allowed to flow. Thus, in the teaching of a class one can find that there are different phases. The class starts slowly, the planned activity is set out, the children begin to work. But then, somewhere in the middle, a question is asked, a discussion takes place, something happens that breaks with the lines of the lesson-plan or that opens it to new possibilities. And then in the midst of this activity, teacher and children become absorbed in what they are doing: things become intense.

The point here is to see that this is not something to be frightened of, it is not something that makes us unhappy. On the contrary it may be associated with some of the more memorable aspects of our teaching and learning, or indeed of our lives more generally. Why is this metonymic? The point is that thought is not confronted with a gap—between one thing and something else it resembles; it is not a matter of representation—say, of the way that the tree relates to the world. Rather there is a contiguity (things touch!), and thought is allowed to flow as it touches this thing, and another and another. It touches, it caresses. Whereas the tree generates an "arborescent" structure: it frustrates touch, being preoccupied with the gaze that seeks representation.

It is interesting to repeat that the tree-rhizome distinction is not a straightforward binary opposition. This is partly because of what we saw earlier about the fact that tree is a metaphor and the rhizome a metonym. The rhizome does not represent but it is continuous with those aspects of the world to which it relates. A Deleuzian approach

here requires us to think in terms of contiguity. A word touches another. It functions, as is well established, not so much through its correlation with the thing it represents as with its connections with other words.

Ultimately Derrida's metonymic vision sees language as conjuring metaphoricity through the *logos*. When the philosopher sees this is so, she can watch for the slippage and shifts that reveal the abyss. She can welcome what comes out of the abyss during linguistic performances. In contrast and in Nietzschean fashion, Deleuze and Guattari travel with the intense flow, where it goes. Ultimately, I do not want to choose between the Derridian or Nietzschean/Deleuzian visions. I believe that they both give rise to rich ways of thinking about education that have only been touched on during this thesis. Nevertheless, we might consider Bearn's rhetorical question: "How do you break on through to the other side of representation?" He responds: "I take my cue from Deleuze and Guattari: I do not think that it can be done alone. It takes at least two, perhaps not two persons, but it takes two" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 243-4).

It seems that the way to become intense takes two and involves catching beautiful particles. Unfortunately it seems that politicians, university lecturers, school leaders and teachers are more likely to catch swine flu than beautiful intense particles if they simply wait around for them. One might argue that the relatively recent upheavals in British education may suggest contagion—national tests have been abolished for 14 year olds and recent reviews of Primary Education have revealed considerable dissatisfaction with the technical target-driven edifice of contemporary education. Nevertheless, as we speak teachers are trying to find "in-school" ways of testing 14 year olds and developing ways of predicting grades at a local level. This bleak situation shows that intensity has been tied in a knot. Just as nothing may come out of Lyotard's desert, beautiful particles may never break on through to the other side.

Perhaps then, the unravelling of language that bearing witness to its iterability would involve may help to untie the knots in our thinking and allow intensity to break on through or arrive—and then we may find that the student is after all the lover. A recent television advert shows children on a beach throwing stones at the grey sky. When the stones penetrate the clouds they release sunlight. Perhaps close attention to the



otherness internal to representation may both release what we have not yet known and also set Bearn's ordinary particles of light (particles all around us already) free. Maybe philosophies of affirmation and absence can have a happy (if sometimes troubled) marriage. Repetition will then act both as a release through intensity and an experience of the alterity internal to our words.

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